




# Trails: Pit Miners

Pair 2. Book 1  
Tales

Pair 2. Book 2  
Mines



Gail Brown

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**Pair 2, Book 1 - Tales**

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# Acknowledgements

Dreaming science fiction was something that happened soon after reading my first science fiction book. For years, I wanted to write some. I once had a novel started, although, I never finished and lost the story decade ago.

A tremendous thank you to all who offer help that often you never see the results of. Years later, even decades later, those you help, will remember the assistance you gave.

May this novel assist others on their search for hope and acceptance in world often not designed for them.

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# Prologue

"Trails Through the Tales" is a peek at southern North America approximately 250 to 300 years after "Trails Through the Fault Lines" and "Trails Through the Volcano." Earthquakes and volcanoes reopened the North American Seaway, inundating parts of several states with seawater. In the early, hungry days, animals from zoos were released, or eaten. Centuries of warring communities further decimated many populations; at times, leaving several regions without adults, or their history. A small human population survived in a prairie and mountainous region where lions, tigers, and camels now roam.

# Chapter 1

The cow and sheep lodge would be empty soon.

Tanna scampered along the dusty trail beyond the villa.

Logan and Kol barked at her heels. Naom hadn't followed.

Cows mooed and circled their grass empty lodge. They'd be slow moving on the trip to Klapit. Young calves nudged their mothers. Sheep stared off into the distance. Water boxes had been drained and turned upside down to dry during the trip.

Her birth villa necklace dangled at her throat. At the Spring Trade, she'd be expected to add a skill charm to join the ranks of gen 2 adulthood, and choose one of the three dogs she had raised as her own. Logan and Kol were more fun. In reality, Naom would be the choice, because she was female.

With no siblings, the whole community of villas expected her to follow her mother's skill. Zella expected it, and constantly barraged her with questions to verify her knowledge of the ancestor's tales, and healing skills.

Spiritual leader was a dull life. Always on the outside, looking in. Never close to anyone, and always expected to decrease the tensions that arose in the villa, especially in the winter months, when being crowded, and unable to hunt for food, caused chronic grouchiness. Zella complained constantly about having to share teas with angry people who couldn't relax and enjoy peace and quiet.

A cow reached across and nosed her face.

Tanna laughed. At least she wasn't the only one to gain her place in society this Spring Trade. Uden, daughter of Odalen, the clay designer, would join the ranks of gen two adulthood, and gain her first child charm.

If Tanna could recite the tales to the other spiritual leaders in charge of digging the buried treasures of their ancestors, she would gain her place as a spiritual leader as well. If not, there weren't any other skills she had trained for. She'd be charmless, and Zella would be shamed.

At least Robin would appreciate her as she was. Warmth rushed through her. Maybe he would be the sponsor of her first child. With a child, she'd keep her place in the villa until she could learn some valuable skill. Or, leave her birth villa behind, and learn a skill in another villa. Tuttle weaving would be better than spiritual leader.

Warm air blew in her face from the cow she had stopped petting.

Erin's favorite, and named something. Normally only dogs and people had names.

"I'll find you some grass. I need to clear the gate soon anyway."

The grass broke easy in small clumps. She carried a handful to the cow, and several more followed to the wall looking for stray strands.

"Don't feed them! They'll be sick on the walk." Erin stepped into view.

"They eat on the walk. A few bites won't hurt. They'll be chewing happily while we clear the walkway." Tanna pulled more grass and tossed it inside.

Erin's cow herd skill charm had only been received last spring. Her mother had always allowed the cows to clear the walkway, and not expected those gaining gen two status to do the work.

"Where are tools to chop the treelings?"

"Uden will bring them. I have to help Zella finish preparing for the trip."

Erin eyed her and shook her head.

Tanna turned back to pulling grass. Something about their villa wasn't right. Only, it spread through more than Lava. At Fall Trade, people from the villas had mingled as usual. There had been a difference she couldn't quite place.

Like the last few gatherings, Orid, and his friends, had jeered at her. Something about it had been creepier than before.

Robin had stepped up beside her and put his arm around her shoulder.

Her body warmed at the memory.

"If I have to do it all myself, go back to your lodge with Zella," Erin said.

Tanna glanced down. The grass had fallen to her lap. She stood up. Most of the blades scattered off her morning shawl, and fluttered to the ground. A few strands clung tightly around her waist. With a tap to her thigh, the dogs joined her, and she walked past the tree barrier to view the Grass Sea beyond Lava.

The Grass Sea, a vast open land of unexplored territory the ancestors had once crossed with ease. Fourth gen grandmothers repeated such tales. Only camels, horses, and bison roamed the Grass Sea. They were food for the villas, hunted at the Fall and Spring Trade gatherings.

There had to be other people out there, somewhere.

A horse herd thundered into view. A brown horse herded the

mixed colored group of ten or more into a small valley not far away from where Zella gathered herbs.

To travel swiftly across the plains with these creatures, the wind blowing in her face would be better than staying alone in a lodge as Zella did.

She shivered.

Goddess Amber wouldn't allow it.

Zella kept the hairs of a horsetail woven into her medicine bag. She would call Tanna a child if she said she wanted to pet one, let alone ride one.

Goddess Amber had never spoken to Tanna. Zella kept asking. How would the Goddess speak? Zella always said she spoke differently to each leader. Perhaps, she wasn't meant to be a leader.

Horses snorted and raced off.

The dogs brushed against her legs.

Zella would be waiting at the lodge. Dare she admit to wanting to follow the horses?

Logan loped ahead on the trail to the outer edge of the villa.

Kol stayed beside her and leaned against her.

Tanna stopped at the clearing.

The villa bustled with people preparing for the day's walk to Klapit. Zella's lodge sat off, alone, almost out of hearing from the rest of the villa. Many a lonely day and night had she spent alone with Zella, when she would rather have been at the crowded villa pit fire, sharing tales, and singing. Recently, she had gone anyway, ignoring her mother's requests to stay in the lodge.

"There you are," Zella said. "Show me you know how to load everything we need to take. You're gen two now, even if you don't want to be."

"Does that make you a third gen?" Zella didn't look old enough to be third gen. Though she certainly had a wise grandmother look about her. Her second child charm had been sliced, and one half buried with the child whose name had never again been spoken. Other not quite forgotten pains she must carry deep inside.

"Of course. Soon, I'll stay behind with the fourth gen grandmothers. It'll be quiet and peaceful in the villa during the Spring and Fall Trades."

Too quiet and peaceful for Tanna's mind. Listening to the fourth gen tales were fun. Traveling and meeting new people would be an even greater adventure than staying behind and living in the past.

"I'll take the herbs to the grandmother's staying behind. Coax

Naom along, and I'll meet you at the clearing." Tanna pulled her gatherboard to her back and visited the grandmothers.

Something was different. It wasn't Uden with a sponsor-less newborn in her arms. Or even Erin, instead of her now missing mother, leading the call to start the trek to Klapit.

The air didn't stir the same. Wind ruffled instead of warming. Sounds muted. People of the villa prepared for the trip slower than they ever had in her memory.

Zella waited at the clearing, ready to go.

She rushed to join her, a lump in her throat. Glad that no words were needed.

## Chapter 2

A giant eagle soared above the plains between Almond and Klapit. Or, maybe it wasn't an eagle. Almost too far off to verify.

Zella scanned the tall grass on the edges of the trail. The day's walk seemed never ending on her tired knees. Her daughter and three dogs ran through the knee-high grass as if there were no danger.

"Tanna, stop playing with the dogs. We have to reach the trade grounds cow lodge before the cows catch up. You'll step on a snake, or in prairie dog hole running without looking."

Tanna laughed. She grabbed the stick in Kol's mouth. "They have so much fun chasing sticks."

"Aren't you supposed to be learning to be gen two like Uden? You can't lead the villa to Klapit if you don't learn the way. Besides, it's too hot to play." Zella shaded her eyes from the midday sun.

Tanna scurried up to her. "You'll be leading for many seasons to come. You have another whole gen to lead."

Laughter echoed behind them. Cows mooed around the trail bend. "We have to be sure the gate is open so Erin can herd the cows in. We're already late."

"It doesn't take long to open it. Shims and Tuttle may have already be there." Tanna patted Logan's head.

"Soon you will lead, and I will fall behind with your children, if you chose to have any. It will only be a few seasons, and you will be training your replacement. Then, I can stay at the villa and rest."

"Do you miss walking in the group?" Tanna chewed a blade of grass.

Zella liked to be off alone, in front of the group. After all, she was the offering to Goddess Amber if anything went wrong.

She rested her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Up here, anything could happen. It's nice to have a companion when walking. After a generation of leading, I'm ready for someone else to take over. I wish for my grandmother's life, when we didn't travel."

"You didn't have many cows then. I don't want to lead the others. Let them take turns." Tanna pulled out her water gourd and splashed her face with as much as she drank.

Lava must never know how much she didn't want to travel. They would never understand. To the villa, the trips were the most fun season. After all, they could rest and relax, normal chores forgotten.

Unlike the spiritual leaders, whose most important work, included busy ceremonies, and digging in the ancestral treasure pits, occurred then.

The outlines of the cow lodge rose before them. Tales said it had been built from the remnants of a city, whatever that was. Somehow, large rectangular rocks piled high kept the cattle, and a few watchers, safe during the trade meetings.

Barking dogs startled her.

Zella pulled herself alert and scanned for the dogs.

Tanna raced to catch up with Kol, Logan, and Naom who sounded as if they were near the cow lodge walls.

"Tanna careful! It might be a rattler!"

If Tanna heard her, she didn't slow.

Zella raced ahead to catch her.

Pushing the tall grass aside, Zella and Tanna reached the dogs. They were quiet, and circled a cradleboard-sized bundle on the ground. A grey, tattered cloth, fluttered gently in the breeze. The dogs sniffed and circled it, ears perked toward the bundle.

Zella turned away shaking. Too many people were in the five villas. Winter had been cold and damp, rotting much of their food supply. The spring had been dry, and gardens hadn't grown well. Without food, they couldn't feed their growing population.

Someone must have left behind an infant last fall. Maybe someone in the Almond villa had given up a child to Amber's care. Tuttle villa had left for home sooner than they had. She would know if Shims, or Lava, had lost any members. The Webbel villa, anything could be true of them.

Babbling from the bundle in the hollow broke the silence.

Tanna moved the blanket.

The infant's face appeared normal.

A warm earthy smell swept up to greet them.

Grass a few body lengths away rustled.

A small fleeing figure disappeared through the grass.

Tanna picked up the bundle and tried to hand it to Zella.

Zella crossed her arms across her chest.

She struggled to remain standing. "No. We must leave it here. We cannot take on more members. No telling why this child was abandoned. Maybe it has a deformity we can't see."

"We can't leave it. Someone left it here for us to find."

"To find, yes. We can't feed it. We don't have enough food for our own people."

"Babies this age don't eat regular food. Can't we at least carry it to the meeting at Klapit? Let the five villas decide?"

Zella sighed. After the illness, the villas had all been smaller. Then, they would have fought over this child. Now, there were too many people, and not enough food. She held out her arms. "Leave the child with me. Go ask the rest of our villa to catch up. A short break from the midday sun will do us all good."

She dumped the baby in Zella's arms. Then she danced off in the sunlight, as it shimmered through the grasses.

Tanna would never grow up.

Zella turned back to the infant. The blanket was an unusual weave. The cradleboard was shaped almost like a Webbel cradleboard. A large round head area, too large, and it barely narrowed before the foot section flared out again.

She gasped.

A perfect baby boy stared up and babbled at her.

Zella sat down and placed the child in her lap. She rocked back and forth, crooning a wordless tune. Tears streamed down her face as she remembered another infant boy, about the same age. How could a mother give up this child? She could never have given up her boy. As the hot tears slid down her cheeks, she lifted her head and cried aloud, "Why? Why now?"

The infant babbled. Tiny hands clutched her shawl, looking for a meal.

Zella had nothing for him. Someone else would have to feed the boy. At least there were three new mothers with them, and he wouldn't go hungry. The council would decide what to do with an additional child. If her were a rattler child, someone would know who the mother was.

Jorn walked up to her, and glanced at her face.

He took the child and turned to the members of the villa. "Who will feed this infant for now?"

All of the new mothers rushed forward. With three of them, they could share the new infant, and none of their babies would suffer. Of course, the villas could decide he should be placed to die as an offering to Goddess Amber.

Since he had been abandoned, he was most likely a rattler, and expected to die, to protect the community from dangers, mostly forgotten, even by the fourth gen grandmothers.

While the group adjusted belongings and chattered, Jorn sat down next to Zella. He put his arm around her. "Who do you think he



belongs to?"

Zella couldn't speak through the tears. She rocked and hugged her knees.

Jorn squeezed her shoulder. "Sis, it was long ago. This is someone else's child. Your son died of the illness that struck all the villas."

She nodded, trying to keep the sobs quiet. "We already have too many members. If I take him, Tanna and I have to leave and form a new villa."

His hand stayed on her shoulder and shielded her from the group, who were busy watching the new infant. "We've all been over the limit for a season, or more. We knew it was coming. We all agreed to wait until next Fall Trade to make a decision. It will work out."

"Now we have four babies, and not the expected three."

"Amber sent us this child for a reason. She won't punish us for taking her gift. Perhaps at the trade meetings, some new mother needs a child to replace one. Disease or disaster may have befallen another villa. Come now, we need to go on." He patted her shoulder, and looked into her eyes.

She nodded, wiped her eyes, and stood up. "Tanna, come."

Almond villa hadn't been ready to leave when they passed. They hadn't visited and gathered news. Perhaps they should have waited. The Almond villa might know something about the infant boy.

Erin and a few of the women herded the cows and sheep into the cow lodge. The cows rushed into the lush pasture that had grown deep and full all summer long. When they began the long trek home, it would be cropped short, and dirt would blow loosely across the ground.

The brush-covered entrance was only a few body lengths away from where the baby had been placed. If someone hadn't been ahead of the herd, the herd might have stampeded across him.

The thirty-five members of the Lava villa who had come on the journey, milled around chatting, waiting on leadership.

Tanna was nowhere in sight.

Zella would lead them on to Klapit. She stood to walk ahead of the group along the path.

Erin would stay behind with the cows and sheep, and wait for the other villas to arrive with their herds.

Tanna raced back to Zella. Three prairie dogs dangled from her hands.

She smiled. Her daughter could outrun anyone in the villa. She had trained Kol, Logan, and Naom to catch prairie dogs for them. There were never enough.

Zella added them to her gatherboard, along with the grains she gathered walking through the tall grass. They should reach Klapit, and their campsite, by nightfall.

A deep rumbling interrupted her thoughts. She squatted down and placed her hands and right ear on the ground. Of only three options, two would bring food. One would bring death and devastation. The rumbling intensified.

She smiled.

Tanna and the dogs raced to her side.

Lava hunters bounded next to them, spears at the ready.

Zella pointed northwards where the sound originated.

There were only five hunters, so they could only kill one or two bison, or maybe three horses, if they were the smaller ones. Large animal hunts occurred while all the villas gathered at Klapit, and she had never been able to attend.

The ground shook as the bison came into view. Grass waved and bent as the tall bison thundered past.

Zella remained calm.

The ground shook from the pounding hooves. Dirt and grass flew high in the air.

The bison stampede seemed to last longer than imaginable. She stood tall, and breathed in the musky odor. Wind created by the bison swayed like the grasses around her. Her heart pounded at being so close to a live animal with so much raw power. Sweat poured off her, as the animals pounded the ground in front of her.

Zella shouted at the hunters, three men, and two women, to hurry and spear the bison before they all got away. The wind whipped the words out of her mouth. She raised her arms to warn them the herd was escaping, and nearly fell.

The thundering slowed, and passed. A last few bison struggled by, limping and bellowing to their herd.

The hunters tightened their grip on their spears and jumped forward. Animal screams cut short. The hunters bellowed.

The bison squealed in the panic of their bloody death throes. Spears stuck out of three dying bison. They thrashed. Blood splattered the grass and hunters.

Zella closed her eyes. A hunt was worse than watching someone die. The screams reminded her of the wounds the hunter had

suffered and died from. Tanna's sponsor had been a hunter. He had died in her arms from the attack of a lion hunting the same bison herd as the hunters many seasons before.

The people of Lava villa caught up, and set up camp to butcher the animals.

Zella had no idea what to do to help. She relied on her foraging skills for food for her and Tanna. Everyone shared food from hunts. A hunt during the walk had happened once before, when she was little more than a toddler. She grabbed Tanna and held her close.

Tanna shook free, and ran to grab the infant they had found, and another baby. "Zella, come help! You can hold babies."

She tried to move, and had trouble walking forward. Her knees wobbled, or perhaps the ground shook, as Goddess Amber spoke her disapproval of rescuing the infant boy. She sat down.

Tanna handed her the two infants.

One of the young mothers rushed to her with the other two infants and set up a portable stick covered cloth panel, so the babies wouldn't remain in direct sunshine.

Jorn directed the butchering process. Once everyone was doing their job, he walked over to her. "Guess we will camp here tonight."

"We did the right thing, I think." Zella nodded.

He sat cross-legged and watched her. "Good." Jorn gazed at the group huddled around the three carcasses. "Maybe we should send Tanna on ahead? Webbel may want to have a good hunt tomorrow, while the bison are nearby."

"I don't like the idea of sending her so far by herself. What stampeded them?"

"I'm not sure. No lions in sight. How far are we?"

"Close enough they may have felt the ground shake."

He watched the rest of the people. "It may seem we are hogging the animals we were given."

"Jorn, please. I'll go."

"Tanna is faster. You stay here with the babies. Let her take two of the dogs and her spear." He stood and hurried to help with the butchering of the bison.

Tanna stepped under the shade. "I heard. I better mind uncle."

Zella reached out to grab Tanna. "Wait. Be sure you have water and food. Take care of yourself. Be careful of rattlers! Take three dogs, your best." Zella's stomach lurched as Tanna pulled away.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry. You already said I need to act gen two. You were leading when you were my age. And anyway, I can be

there quickly!" She pulled away.

"I led surrounded by dogs. Not on my own!"

Tanna raced down the overgrown trail with Logan, Kol, and Naom at her heels.

Zella busied herself with infants. Tanna should be fine. One baby began to cry. Was it Jana, Janel, or Corandra? She couldn't remember. In fact, she had so lost contact with the villa; she couldn't remember which infant belonged to which mother. She remembered each birth, and each infant's face, though she couldn't match them with their mother.

Uden walked up.

One baby cried and reached for her.

"Poor Corandra. I'll feed her. Mother Zella, do you have any food to provide?" Uden took the crying infant.

I'm not a grandmother. The whole villa must see me as failing now.

The prairie dogs her daughter had caught and the grains she had gathered were in the basket at her side. "Sure, here is my basket. Do I need to stay way back here?"

"Probably a good idea with the infants. If they were older, they could watch and learn. They're all so young."

Uden fed the baby and cooed to her.

Rest felt good.

To see this younger girl with a baby of her own, calm and relaxed in the mother role surprised her. She couldn't picture Tanna ever settling down. "You are the same age as my daughter."

"Younger. Tanna taught me to walk by grabbing my hands and trying to run with me."

Zella laughed. Tanna had once dragged Uden through a puddle. Uden slipped, and fell into a hidden fiery anthill. "I hope Tanna stays safe."

"She will. Goddess Amber is with her today. She will lead us to something new, something we all need." Her eyes stared off in the distance, her face masked. A look of pain of some sort had blinked across the mask. Corandra's birth had been normal, though Uden had pushed the infant away at first glance.

Zella watched her closer.

Uden fed her baby without ever looking at her face. She laid her baby down beside the other three, and caressed each forehead as she rocked forward to stand.

"You'll be fine, Mother Zella?" Uden asked.

Zella nodded. A tear slipped down her cheek.

Uden ran back to the group butchering the animals.

With four tiny infants, Zella had never felt so alone. Not even when leading the villa with Tanna as an infant on her back.

Lava villa accepted her. She had been born to the villa.

Something had always been missing.

Her eyes rested on the new infant's cradleboard. It wasn't Webbel. Nor, did it belong to Almond, Tuttle, Shims, or Lava.

The boy didn't stir.

Corandra kicked and cooed, grabbing at a loose string on her new cradleboard. The middle curves were muddy, and a long splinter poked out. The head curve had split on one side.

Zella's heart skipped and danced.

Uden hadn't kept the cradleboard repaired. Who was Corandra's sponsor? She touched Corandra's cheek, and soothed her back to sleep. The new infant didn't wake. His cradleboard was perfect. As if crafted only days before. Who might this child be, and why had he been left in their path?

## Chapter 3

Breathing and running felt the same to Tanna, a natural part of life. Her three favorite dogs, Logan, Naom, and Kol raced beside her. She checked to be sure they stayed with her, and didn't fall behind, or wander off. When their tongues began to hang too low, she gave them some water.

Tanna paused at a trial marker rock. A noise other than the baking wind whistled through the grass.

The dogs panted, glad for the rest after the morning's long walk.

Robin walked out of the brush from the direction of the northern entrance to the cow lodge. "Good to see you Tanna. My sponsor is nearby." He exaggerated looking all around.

"Your mom and the rest of Lava are with you?"

Tanna laughed. "The good news is a herd of bison are back that way." She pointed behind her. "Almond will catch up with our group soon. Is Tuttle behind you?"

Robin nodded. "A quarter day march, or Vira and Nala would be with me and Dover."

"Hopefully we won't meet Orid." She shivered in the warm sunshine.

"Zella let you run on ahead." Robin joined her on the rock.

"She didn't. Uncle Jorn wanted me to find Tuttle and Webbel to invite them to the hunt."

Dover stepped through the brush. "We have to be fair."

"I'd rather not invite Webbel," Tanna said.

"Perhaps we should wait and see what Quan and Irvin want to do. No point in going on, only to turn back."

Tanna glanced at Robin's face.

His furrowed brow shared her feelings.

"Maybe you can go for us? Blake will listen to you."

Dover stared at her and petted Naom. "And they sent you instead of Zella because?"

"I can't sit still." Tanna lowered her head.

"Normal for your age." Dover laughed and leaned back to look up at the sky. "The best way to be. Quan is concerned about Webbel too. I think I'll let you two hawk eyes go on, if you promise to be careful, and come straight back here."

Logan nuzzled her hand.

"Shouldn't our four villas be enough people?"

"We can never be sure." Dover paused.

"You're too young to remember." Dover closed his eyes, shook his head, and wrapped his hands around his knees. "Hurry on ahead, both of you. Be quiet and careful."

Robin took her hand. "Come on. If we hurry, we can be back before nightfall!"

He took off, half dragging her with him as they fled through the grasses. They shouldn't be far from Klapit. Maybe a short run at this speed.

Soon they found a line of bent grass that stretched as far as they could see in either direction. They paused for a drink of water. "Something is odd here," Robin whispered. He pointed at unusual tracks in the path.

Tanna leaned forward from watering her dogs and examined the tracks more closely. A villa of people could not leave the grasses crushed that deeply, or so even.

It didn't look right, or natural. "Let's be really careful, and quiet. In fact, let's make our own path, so no one can see us." She hurried back into the cover of the tall grass. Soon they were walking fast, no longer running, in the direction the path followed.

At last, they peeked through the grass into Klapit clearing.

Tanna gasped at the mess. She covered her mouth with her hand and backed up.

Robin's toes wiggled under her foot.

She turned to him, and he pulled her even further back.

To remain invisible, they walked further from the main path. They crouched down and peeked through the tall grass at the dig area. Tall things, like trees without limbs or leaves, were on the ground. Flat items, like walls, slid across the ground. Things they had never seen before, or imagined. People, mostly third gen adult men, ran like ants, scurrying into pits, and while others scrambled out, under heavy loads.

Tanna could not remember seeing any of the dozens of people; more than two villas worth of adult men. No women or children visible anywhere.

It was like a memory of the tales the ancestors had warned them of. Secrets, hurts, and separation in way that was wrong. Community death would follow. Goddess Amber would be angered. She might awaken the Mad Gods and shake the land once again.

Robin's face paled. He grabbed her arm, and they walked carefully back, close to the trail they had followed before.

He glanced up and down their thin trail. He silently alerted the dogs with a hand hunt signal. Robin grabbed her hand, and hurried off at a trot down a new, parallel trail.

When they reached the place they had originally picked up the Webbel trail, he barely paused. Sounds carried down the trail. Only, they weren't voices, or people walking. It was a clomping sound.

Robin ran as fast as he could through the grass.

Tanna and the dogs had difficulty keeping up.

At last, they all collapsed out of breath.

"We must hurry. They are fresher than we are, and can catch us," Robin whispered. He swallowed some water.

Tanna tried to drink, and couldn't help shuddering when she thought of Orid, and his attentions last fall. She didn't like him before. After that, the sight of him made her sick. Why all the other girls in his villa were attracted to him, she couldn't understand. Neither Orid, nor the young women of his villa had been at Klapit.

Robin grabbed her hand, and they ran again.

They reached the trail where she had met him earlier in the day. Night fast approached. There was no sign of clouds in the sky. The stars would give them some light, though maybe not enough to know if anyone followed.

Robin checked the signs. He picked up a red painted twig, barely a finger long. "Come on, they went this way." Robin grabbed her arm, glancing around only long enough to make sure the dogs were with them, and on full alert.

At last, they heard soft singing. The odor of fire pits wafted along the breeze. The villas had created a camping spot for the night, and waited on them.

Dogs barked as they approached.

Tanna breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped into the clearing.

Zella cried and held onto Dover's arm. What could be wrong?

With a new burst of energy, Zella ran to her. Hugging her, Tanna collapsed.

"Food, water, quick!" Dover said.

She didn't remember much for a while.

A fire pit flickered. Darkness loomed, with only a point of light.

Robin held her hand.

Logan, Kol, and Naom panted at her feet.

Dover and Zella were nearby talking with the leaders from all four villas.

Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong.



Uden walked up and placed the unknown infant boy in her arms. This child could be anyone's child. Orid's face flashed in front of her. She shuddered.

"Tanna," Dover said, "Please tell us what you and Robin saw." She turned to Robin.

"I already told them," he said. "They need you to confirm it."

There was no easy way to describe the unusual tracks in the grass, and the odd trees. Third gen adults didn't usually run around. Running in the summer sun could be deadly for anyone. Being young, she could run in it better than those men could. As long as she stayed in the shade of the grass, and not in the clearings. She had never been sun sick, though she and Zella had treated many adults for sun sickness.

Zella reached for her hand.

Tanna wouldn't let the baby go. The cradleboard was almost like a Webbel one. The mother must have been unable to shave it correctly. Maybe the deformed cradleboard was to protect it when she no longer could. This child was unwanted by its mother. His sponsor might even be Orid.

She held the baby close, staring deep into his eyes, wishing she could read in them the tale of his birth. She feared Orid. She didn't fear this boy, yet. Glancing up at Zella, a tear slid down her cheek. This child could be a child born of an attack. A rattler, one who was expected to die.

Tanna held him closer, brushing her cheek against his.

## Chapter 4

A chill tickled down Zella's spine as Tanna related her adventure. Jorn paced the fire lit area, almost running off at one point.

The leaders had suspected something for a while. At last Fall Trade, Blake had made some strange remarks, and kept hunters watching the west side of Klapit. He also had told them not to fill in their dig pits. Blake claimed he'd send hunters back to catch animals that fell in the trapped pits, and would share with the other villas. No runners, or captured food, had arrived at Lava or Shims villas.

This bison hunt might be a trap. Or was it Goddess Amber sending them a chance to talk alone and plan for their own protection?

Some new emotion shone in Tanna's eyes. What it was, she wasn't sure. The way she held the infant close to her, that spoke volumes too. Staring into his big brown eyes, Tanna rocked him to sleep on her lap. She was gen two now, ready for a child of her own, if she wanted one.

Her heart ached. Zella longed to keep the infant as hers. The boy, who hadn't lived, could live again in this young infant.

"I think we leaders need to talk, without the children," Jorn said.

"Don't exclude me, or Robin. We are adults now too. If Zella expects me to lead next fall, I need to know what is going on." Tanna clutched the infant closer.

Zella's face felt hot.

Jorn turned to her.

"Yes," she whispered.

"They need to be included," Dover said.

"Okay." Jorn shrugged. "Quan, bring the people close together. Tell them to sing and tell tales. We must be guarded by them not knowing our conversation. No one is to interrupt our council. Come."

Jorn stalked off to the tent in the middle of the camp.

Zella held out her hand to Tanna. Too late.

Robin was already helping Tanna up.

Zella smiled. Maybe they wouldn't make the same mistake she had. They would make a good match.

The noise around the fire intensified.

Zella stepped inside the tent to relative peace and quiet. She settled beside her daughter.

The four villas observed the normal seating arrangement. This

left the fifth point, closest to the entry in the star circle, open for the missing villa. No one was here to represent it. Zella with Tanna and Jorn sat to the right of the entry. Dover with Robin and Quan sat to the left in Shims position. This left Varl with daughter Sharel and leader Marin of the Almond villa, and Vira with daughter Nala, and Tuttle leader Irvin facing the entry.

Tanna placed the baby in the empty space, between Jorn and Quan, to represent the missing villa.

"You have all heard what these young adults have to say. Secrets have been kept from the leaders, and the people. Overpopulation already threatens the anger of the Goddess. Secrets could awaken her wrath." Jorn said.

All were quiet.

"The Lava villa agrees this is a dangerous situation." Jorn said.

Zella placed her hands holding her tiny rectangular shaped ancestral object in the circle. It was said to contain the words of the Goddess Amber.

"The Shim villa agrees?"

Quan placed his hands holding the thumb length, cylinder shaped ancestral object inside the circle. Tales proclaimed this object to give power to the user.

"The Almond Villa?"

"What does this mean for us?" Marin held out her hands showing the metal slingshot shaped ancestral object. It made a vibrating sound when struck with stone.

"Tuttle villa?"

Irvin reached forward, touching Marin's hand with a long thin, bendable ancestral object. This piece, like so many others from the mines would break. A brightly colored outside that bent, and a brittle inside that crumbled to dust.

"Roamers have increased. Bears or cats have been blamed for damage during the trade travels, when maybe it wasn't them." Quan held his hands in the speaking space.

"We are small in number, with only one hundred and forty people, two-thirds of whom are adults. It isn't many, even if we think it is. This area once supported far more people. We have no idea how, or why," Jorn said.

"Dover went a few months ago on a scouting mission. Perhaps he can tell us what he saw?" Quan said.

"I saw people. Far more than ancient custom says can safely survive here. I am not talking about a few over in each villa as we

figure out how to redistribute people into already full villas. Or, decide who leaves to form a new villa away from their friends and family. It looked like double a multi-villa trade meeting already in progress." Dover leaned back, a faraway look on his face.

There was no way one person could remember so many names and faces. Zella couldn't imagine why anyone would want to be part of such a large group. Even when the five villas joined for the trades, there were many she could not remember.

Marin held her trembling hands in the speaking space. "How many do you think?"

"Some of the conversations I overheard made it clear there were more, many more, somewhere near," Dover said.

Zella didn't know, or care, who whistled. They probably all did. That was a lot of people. This could anger the Mad Gods. Waking them up could bring disease and devastation.

"Breaking the ancient laws will lead all of us to danger." Tanna said.

Jorn smiled. Everyone knew he spoiled his niece. For her to speak what was on all of their minds, helped them save face.

"That is why we are here tonight instead of Klapit."

"They will be wondering where we are, since we're all here." Tanna tucked the blanket under the infant.

"Maybe not. Let's hope they don't expect us for another day. I think from what you and Robin saw, they don't expect us tonight. They were rushing to cover up whatever they were doing."

The pile of ancestral tools lay in the center of the speaking paces. Until one was removed, the conversation would continue. Of course, the Webbel spearhead wasn't there. Goddess Amber might not hear them speak. Whether that was good, or bad, remained unknown.

Tanna reached out and touched the pieces.

Tales of the fourth gen grandmothers said the tools would bring them hope and peace one day. As long as the pieces lasted, so would their community. Goddess Amber had given them these tools as reminders of a civilization that came to ruin.

Perhaps Tanna would unlock whatever Goddess Amber had planned for their future.

Zella touched Tanna's arm. "We don't know the full meaning of the ancestor's objects. We pass them down, hoping to find the knowledge hidden for more gens than can be remembered. Maybe someday, these items will bring us to a future where we can visit

and live as our ancestors did."

Jorn leaned forward. "Without their downfall. All we know, is they fell from the grace of Amber, and lost everything. Some generations we want to know more, and search for more mines. Some generations have chosen not to want to know their past, and dig less. It's difficult to say what is best."

Tanna's face was unreadable as she stared at Robin.

"What the Webbel toolmakers have done could easily anger the Goddess Amber and cause the awakening of the Mad Gods. The land could quake again. Water could appear where none was before. Mountains could fall." Jorn said.

Quan leaned forward. "We could have joined them, if they had included us. However, they have hidden their ways from us. They have lied."

"Secrets," Irvin said. "Not really lies."

Quan turned to Irvin. "Secrets and lies are twins. While we are not as open with the children as perhaps we should have been, we can see the error in our ways."

"We don't know enough," Zella said. "We must prepare to meet them tomorrow, and see what they are doing. If Webbel hasn't hidden everything from view."

"I doubt they could hide those odd tracks," Tanna said. "Where were the women and children?"

All they could do was guess what would happen, and what the Webbel villa might have done. After a long talk, the situation came down to wait and see. Be prepared for anything.

"Tomorrow will be a long, difficult day," Jorn said. "Leaders, verify that your entire villa is here. Let me know if you see anyone who doesn't belong to your villa." He picked up the Lava ancestral object.

Tanna picked up the dozing infant and hurried out of the tent.

Ah, to be too old, or too young, to understand. Zella would rather be too old. She wasn't sure the upcoming changes were ones she wanted to live through. There was no living memory of fighting between villas. There were chilling bloody battle tales of the ancestors. Not something she wanted to see, or be a part of.

Slipping outside last, Zella searched for Tanna. Her voice spoke not far away in the crowd. Tales circulated. People knew something potentially bad was coming. Out here in the Grass Sea, there was nothing. No materials and no knowledge, to make weapons to protect themselves if they needed too. Webbel had given them only

the bare essential tools, none strong enough to be reliable protection.

Of course, there were the bison bones. With the right knowledge, they could be shaped into quality tools. She hurried to the place where they had been piled after butchering. Normally, the children would carry them to Klapit for the Webbels to create tools for the next trade meeting. She grabbed a pelvic bone. It would make a good plate, and the hooves would be used in ceremonies.

Survival might be more important than dishes.

Zella had never used an unaltered bone as a weapon. She picked up a leg bone.

A noise startled her from behind.

She clutched the bone.

The grass rustled behind her. Although small creatures generally avoided where people were, it could be a rattlesnake. The grasses beyond the edge of firelight rippled again.

Leg bone raised above her head, she stepped forward.

She reached out and grabbed a bundle of material on the ground.

An unrecognized girl slid out.

Zella's whistle shrilled through the night.

The girl didn't struggle. She put her hands over her ears and hid her face.

Jorn arrived first.

Looking first at Zella, then at the child, he reached out his hand.

"Child, are you alone?"

She nodded and motioned a sign.

Zella grabbed Jorn's arm.

The child put her arms together and rocked them.

"Can you speak?" Zella said.

The people of the villas crowded around them.

Jorn turned back to them. "Let's all follow Zella's example, at least in part. Everyone who doesn't carry a spear, or a bow and arrow, please grab a bison bone to keep with you. It may come in handy. Now back to camp. We start early tomorrow."

Jorn picked the little girl up. He carried her through the group, and into the tent.

Tanna ran up with Robin and the baby.

As they entered the tent, the child saw the baby and squealed.

The flap closed behind Tanna, and the girl ran to the baby. She touched a tiny leg then turned to Jorn and Zella. "My brother." Her

words were thick, as if her tongue were swollen.

"Sit," Zella said. "Tell us your tale."

The girl went to the middle of the circle, and sat down hugging her shoulders.

Robin found a piece of horsehide to wrap around her thin arms. She smiled at him.

"I don't understand everything mom said. I'm Rusty. Brother had no name. Mama came from old Shells. Don't know where that is." Rusty gazed around the group.

Shells? Zella took a deep breath. She had heard Shells mentioned, and thought it was an abandoned place, where seashells were gathered.

"Pater came from Mills. He brought something with him to the Webbel people. The Webbels had invited my mom's people to come live near them."

The horsehide shawl slipped off her shoulders.

Who was Pater? Zella pulled the shawl back up and tucked it in around Rusty's arms.

"Pater went back to Mills for something, I don't know what. The funny looking man came back and said he died there. Brother was born soon after. And Mama didn't want the Webbels to know about him. She sent me to find someone named Zella."

Tanna covered her mouth with her hand.

"I heard you and Tanna talking, and figured I had the right people. I liked you anyway. Better than those Webbel people. Even the men with you seem nice."

The child's frown became a smile.

"After giving you the baby, I hid. I followed behind the group. A few kids saw me. I was careful to cover my tracks."

"Not too careful, or you wouldn't have been caught tonight," Jorn said.

"I couldn't leave my brother without being sure he was safe. I was going to find him, when she scared me."

Zella smiled. This child, maybe seven, treated her as an equal. Then again, maybe she was an equal. After all, at seven, Zella would hardly have walked across the plains with a baby and no protection. The lions would have had her for lunch. She shivered at the thought.

"Rusty, what can you tell us about the Webbels and old Shells? What is life like there?" Jorn shifted his weight, glancing between the child and Zella.

"Well, it's always busy. We rest when the other groups come to visit. The men are always bothering mama. Recently, they chase me too. I don't like them."

Zella shuddered again, and noticed Tanna did the same. "Child, where is your mom?"

Tears glistened on her cheeks. "She said she was going back to old Shells. I don't think so though. They burned it." Rusty sniffled. "She was too weak. She watched me leave. Then, the men came, and attacked her again. I waited, crying softly. If they found me, they would hurt me too. When they left, mom didn't move. I had to leave. So, I wiped my tears and walked." Her hand went to her cheek.

"At least it wasn't far." Tanna handed the baby to Rusty.

She wiped her eyes, and took the infant. "No, it wasn't bad. The birds came with me. A wolf followed along. That's how I knew I was close. The barking dogs chased it off."

A wolf could be a friend, or a dangerous warning. Wolves rarely travelled alone; maybe it was a wild dog. Blake had evicted a few last Spring Trade. Zella sniffed the baby's blanket. No smell of wolf or dog.

"Zella you take Rusty, and the baby with you. Let Tanna name the infant," Jorn said.

She held out her hand to the girl. The last thing they needed was to increase by two, and anger the Goddess more. For one night.

The camp quieted as they walked through. Her sleeping place was surrounded by their dogs. They were sleeping well, not agitated. They wiggled as she and Tanna moved them to make room to sleep.

Rusty took the blanket Robin had given her, and leaned up against Kol.

He stirred, licked her head, and went back to sleep.

Zella sighed. Kol accepted Rusty. Maybe they were used to accepting anyone who arrived with Zella. The child may be a lion hidden in their midst.

"Kol smells the baby even more strongly on her. How sweet." Tanna snuggled up to Rusty to help her stay warm in the cool night air.

Zella used to hold Tanna that way, not so long ago. Her hands trembled as she pulled her horsehide blankets over her. It might not be long before she stayed behind on trips. To stay and mind the summer gardens, and the youngest toddlers. Long walks in the brushy trees. Waiting on the vegetables to grow was another matter.



As was keeping the rabbits from eating the tender shoots.

## Chapter 5

Tanna woke early, uneasy. She couldn't remember why.

An arm sprawled across her chest.

Panicking, she reached out to push it away, and then realized it was Robin.

She smiled. After the camp had settled down, he had snuck to her side to keep guard, in case any of the Webbels arrived looking for Rusty.

She gently moved his arm and rolled over.

He stirred only a little. The infant, and Rusty, were both fast asleep beside her. Zella's place was empty. Logan, Kol, and Noam guarded, lazily half-asleep, tongues lolling, alert for noises in the pre-dawn.

Tanna stood up carefully, calling gently to Kol. "Come Kol, I need to go, surely you do to."

Kol held his head to one side, yawned at Tanna, and stretched.

They walked through the camp to the used water grounds. Voices murmured near the tent.

Uden slept nearby. Perhaps it was her daughter cooing in the night.

Creeping to the side of the tent, she listened.

"It isn't safe," Zella said.

"And it isn't safe for them to go on. They might have been seen," Dover said.

Panic in Zella's voice caused it to lower and cut out. "No. I don't want to send her back. Not by herself."

"She won't go alone. Send her with Robin, Rusty, and the baby. If those two do go back, someone will recognize them for sure, especially Rusty. Then all of us, particularly you and Tanna, will be in serious danger."

Zella's muffled cries leaked through the tent fabric. "My only child. I can't let her go alone. The villas will protect her."

"There is no easy answer." Jorn said. "Let her go. We need her there. Plus, we have no idea what Rusty does, or doesn't know."

More sobs filled the pause.

"I don't want to scare you. We need Webbel to think Rusty is dead. When she wakes up, tell Rusty she must change her clothes to change her allegiance. Oh, and cut her hair off too."

"During the night, I saw people watching this direction. They

know we are coming today," Dover said.

"Did you run all the way there?" Zella said between snuffles.

"Only part way. It seems the path they have built is used frequently. I needed to see what Robin and Tanna saw. So as soon as he left to join you and Tanna, I hurried to see the pathway they found."

"Quickly, they must go. Before the camp wakes," Jorn said. "It will be daylight soon."

Tanna jumped up and hurried on her way. She wasn't gone long. Returning another way, she arrived before Zella, and her sleeping mat hadn't chilled.

Zella walked into the circle and woke Robin. "Oh Tanna, there you are. Hurry, and grab your things. Uden will be here soon."

Tanna grabbed her gatherboard. She gently picked up the baby to see how he was this morning.

Uden walked sleepily up, carrying her daughter. "Here, let me have him."

"Who will feed him on the trip?" Tanna said before she realized Zella hadn't told her. She covered her mouth.

Her mom sat down, almost touching Rusty.

"I'm going too." At Zella and Tanna's startled look. Uden looked at them. "Zella, I don't know what is going on. And I don't care. This baby needs food, and I can give it. Besides, I'm scared. I'd rather not see the Webbels at Klapit with my own baby right now." She tried to see the embers in the fire pit.

Tanna reached out to comfort her.

"How long?" Zella said.

"My gatherboard is ready. Have Rusty ready."

Zella tapped Rusty's shoulders. "Come, now."

"Wait," Uden whispered. "Tanna you take this extra shawl for her. Let her dress in it now."

Uden must have heard through the tent as Tanna had. Tanna hoped no one else heard, or forgot it if they did. She grabbed her gatherboard and spear, and reached for the shawl. It would be a long walk.

Zella took Rusty's outfit.

Tanna handed the girl an oversized outfit.

After Rusty changed, Tanna covered her in Uden's shawl.

Robin, with his gatherboard and spear, followed speaking softly to Zella.

Rusty stumbled along beside her in the predawn chill.

They reached the remains of the bison hunt bone pile.

Zella pulled out Rusty's old outfit.

"I can't do it. I don't want to," Zella said.

"Hush." Robin walked up to Rusty and whispered to her.

She sat and placed her long hair over a boulder.

Robin chopped off her hair, piled it on top of her clothes. He pointed away back down the trail towards Almond.

He threw a bloody piece of fresh bison meat on the pile, and grabbed a leg bone. Robin waved them away.

Robin pounded the bison meat and clothes. That sound sent shivers racing up and down Tanna's spine.

Tanna followed behind Zella and Rusty into the Grass Sea.

With her hands over her ears, Rusty stumbled along.

They walked east, towards Almond. The sun would rise as they began the long journey back to the winter camps. They stopped to wait for Robin out of site of the camp and hunting area.

Robin joined them, and sat down, breathing hard. "Good Rusty. Good pretend."

"Dover wouldn't tell me why." Zella said.

Robin tousled what was left of Rusty's hair. "Someone might be watching, even if the dogs think of them as safe."

"The dogs accept almost everyone," Tanna said.

"Now, hurry back Zella, and send Uden and the babies to join us."

"Do you think someone was watching and knew you whispered to her?" Tanna said.

"She understood, thankfully. I don't think anyone was close enough to hear, I didn't want to take any chances."

Tanna's thoughts drifted to the infant. He had to have a name. She couldn't focus on that now, though. "Robin, how do you know so much that they are doing? Our villa retains the ancestor's tales and knowledge. Does your villa keep secrets too?"

"Only medical facts that others might not remember. We'd gladly share them if someone asked."

The grass rustled behind them. Tanna reached for her bone club.

Uden stepped through with both babies. "Zella didn't dare come again. Too many tracks. Here, take the unnamed, and some food. We must be gone quickly."

Tanna reached for the infant.

Rusty took the food.

Logan and Kol rushed up to her.

Tanna strode off along the trail. Dawn sneaked above the horizon. Juggling infants and gatherboards, it would be nearly midday before they reached Almond. She wasn't sure if they would stay there, or go on to Lava. Neither Zella, or Jorn had been clear.

Camels, horses, bison, or even prairie dog holes could slow them down even more. Every sound made them jump. The dogs kept close. They trotted off every now and then to investigate clearings, and prairie dog towns. They never ventured far ahead, or behind. Their tails wagged continuously, never stiff and alert.

The first march led them past the cow lodge. They turned slightly north, to avoid the main path leading to Almond. A gentle breeze blew the tops of the Grass Sea.

Tanna rested.

Uden took turns feeding Corandra and the infant boy.

Kol and Logan stretched out beside her, tongues lolling. They jumped up, on full alert, and stared ahead.

Tanna grabbed her bison bone and held it close as her heart beat faster and louder in her chest.

## Chapter 6

Zella walked by the bone pile.

Mice already scrambled over the heap of tattered, bloody rags. The scattered remnants of the bison hunt clattered as small creatures slipped and slid away. The present sounds and sights, as well as fear of the infant, pulled her emotions taut. She had always been strong, never breaking, never letting the past sneak through to the present. To send her daughter off alone into the unknown was more than she could stand. The boy child who could belong to anyone. As much as she wanted to push him away, she also wanted to keep him for herself.

Tears streamed down Zella's hand covered cheeks.

Weight landed on her shoulder.

"Come. It will all be better soon. We will find a way. Our ancestors did." Jorn touched her hand.

Zella sighed. "They had turmoil many generations before peace came back, for us, their descendants. I have always lived in peace. Our mom went searching for the mountains that we've never seen, to find something, and she never came back."

Jorn squatted beside her, holding her arm.

The sun peeked over the horizon.

An odor of flesh residue on the bones beside her, wafted upward.

"They had to wait for peace, because they were afraid of it. They didn't know peace. Like us, they wanted life to stay as they knew it, only better."

Zella wiped away her tears. "I know. I miss my daughter right now, and the unknown boy she took with her. I don't want them to die. I want to grow old and die first, as it should be."

"I know you do. We need you. Tanna needs you strong, and not to let anyone know you are worried too much. Confident, and cautious, as you've always been. We fear far more than they can understand right now. I fear we will all find out together exactly how serious the situation is. We have a short walk today to Klapit. I want you, Dover, Varl, and Vira to go together in front. If there is a problem, send Vira and Varl back immediately."

Zella squared her shoulders, and walked back to her sleeping area. Her belongings wouldn't take long to gather. One of Tanna's dogs, Naom, had stayed behind. She would be good company.

Dover brought Varl and Vira to where she was waiting. Klapit wasn't far off to the west. The four of them could have made it there quickly. However, with all the families, dogs, baggage, infants, and the not so young, it could be midday before they were all fed, and managed the short walk. Especially, with all the chatter and reunions of friends and siblings. A hard knot formed in her stomach as her fear of the unknown increased.

The people of the four villas stayed behind them, leaders and hunters around the edges as guards. Jorn and Quan tried to remind the people to be quiet, though what reason they had given, Zella didn't know. Heavy bison meat dripped with residual blood and needed to be hung soon so it could dry. Then, soaked clothing and covers would have to be washed. There had been no singing, or laughter, as the people left camp, though they were glad to be carrying food. They might be able to stay and enjoy the mining experience, if the group leaders decided not to hold another bison hunt.

Mid-morning approached, as did the rise in land that marked the slight turn to their usual entry to Klapit. When they reached the end of the path, Jorn directed the villas to sit quietly in the tall grass.

Dover walked on ahead. He parted the grasses carefully, and glanced through. Waving the dig leaders forward, he strode out into the clearing.

Zella waved Naom to sit, and caught up with Dover. Varl and Vira followed cautiously behind her.

Everything appeared normal, on the surface. A quick glance at the ground revealed little, though she didn't dare look closely for changes. Further out were the odd, regular indentions Tanna had mentioned. Long indented rows, as if logs had laid there for days.

Dover bumped her arm as six strong men approached.

She almost jumped. Not good to be caught staring at the changes.

Zella didn't recognize the welcoming committee. She should, even if she didn't remember their names. A sound, not quite a gasp, and not a whimper came from behind her. Either Vira, or Varl, agreed with her, and they were far more social than she was.

One man walked ahead of the group holding out his arms, "So many at once. I thought the villas only sent one or two ahead."

"Normally, yes," Dover said. "However, we caught up with one another yesterday. We need to speak with Blake and Calen. Are they at the dig lodge?"

The six men surrounded Dover, Zella, Varl, and Vira.

"Yes. They are waiting. Follow us." The leader opened a walkway between the welcoming committee.

As they circled around the edge of the pit mine, Zella barely glanced at it. Out of the corner of her eye, tiny abnormalities jumped out. Not good. No one was supposed to dig until all the villas arrived and made the decision on where to dig together.

The dig lodge had been built many gens before, from hard rocks previously found in the pit. It leaned to one side. The only windsun slanted a jagged line to the usually open entry. A board with the letters "kla" in red hung over the closed wooden entry. Last trade meeting, there had been talk of tearing it down. Someday, maybe they would, if it didn't fall down in a summer storm.

One man opened the entry, and ushered them into the small, dark room.

Something was different. Even the windsun cover was pulled tight. Her eyes adjusted to the lack of light.

Calen and Blake leaned in a corner. They were obviously discussing something, almost wordlessly.

The floor had been swept clean, instead of covered in piles of dust, leaves, and animal tracks. A small line faded in and out of the dirt floor.

The two men didn't acknowledge them as they walked in.

Calen gestured widely, paler than Blake. "Grubs," he mumbled.

She wasn't sure what he meant. Calen's tone of voice sent a shiver down her spine.

Blake stood calmly, his arms crossed. He glanced up, at the group in front of him. "Well, hello there. You are late this season. What happened? Sorry we have to meet in here. The sun simply doesn't agree with me."

Something unusual for a leader to say. Webbel leaders shouldn't have been here ahead of the rest of the villas. Their villa, a day's walk south, should have caught up with them in the night, if they had been arriving as expected. Roamers should never have been admitted to the dig location without full approval of all of the villas.

Dover took the lead from her however, stepping almost in front of her by doing so.

"The Lava villa was walking when the bison herd came. They were able to kill three. They waited for the rest of us to catch up to spilt up the meat. We did bring a share for your villa as well."

Calen relaxed and listened, watching Dover closely.



"Our villas will be here soon; they will be ready to set up the meat drying racks. Then, as a group, we must decide if we will have another bison hunt before we go to our summer fishing camps." Dover's voice did not waver.

"Oh." Blake raised an eyebrow, "So you went ahead with the bison hunt, and now you want to ask if we want to join you in another? Why should we?"

This wasn't good. Zella gulped.

Calen glanced at Blake, and back to Zella. "Normally, we would. However, we are already a day behind. Let the leaders discuss that later. We need to decide where to dig now."

Blake laughed drily. "Are you sure finding bison is the only reason you all joined to walk together?"

"Of course," Dover said. "Why else?"

"It seems a few people are missing. What, no apprentices?" Blake gazed around the little room, stopping to stare at Zella.

Zella blinked. Of course, he would ask. Jorn had solved that problem already.

"No," Dover said. "They were needed elsewhere. Sharel and Nala are with the main villas. Robin and Tanna will meet up with us later, if they can. A soon to be new mother needed their help."

"I can see I am done here. I will leave you and Calen to discuss your digging arrangements. I have work to do." Blake stared hard at each of them. Then stared the longest at Calen, before he stalked out of the dark dig lodge.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief at his exit. A different tension hung in the air.

"How about we walk among the pits, and choose where to dig? I have a few suggestions. We can decide together." Calen led the way out into the sunshine.

Zella was the last to leave. Something shuffled inside the dark dig lodge. She glanced around and saw no one. Perhaps, a mouse or rat scrambled through the dust and dirt in the dark corner.

Outside in the sunlight, the people of the villas stepped through the tall grass camp boundary. Jorn was in front.

She barely glanced at them, and turned to follow Calen, Dover, Varl, and Vira.

Calen chose a section she could not remember anyone ever having excavated. That was good. The useful things were long gone throughout most of the pit. Soon, they would have to try to find another pit to dig. It might even mean a move from their winter

homes. There had to be another, after all their ancestors had numbered well beyond the hundreds that were known to have inhabited this region in living memory.

"Zella, you take that section, over by the bushes. Dover, to this side. Varl, Vira, you may choose, I'll be in the middle here."

Normally, Zella would be glad for the shade. Now, she feared it could hide something, or someone, while she worked. Assigned sections were not something that had ever been done before. She walked over to her assigned segment and examined it.

Vira came up to rope off Zella's section.

Her section would be a square, three body lengths each direction. A simple design. If all went well, the ropes would be there when they came back through for Fall Trade, before heading to their winter homes.

Vira set up each dig section with the proper ceremony. After all, it wouldn't be fair if the ground, or ropes, shifted, giving one person more space than another to dig.

Zella sat down and patted the ground while she waited. Firm, though not too firm. Tomorrow after the welcome feast would be their first chance to begin digging. Searching for the secrets and tools of their ancestors, often waited on the demands of the villas.

Her shoulders dropped as Sharel ran to her sponsor Varl. The container in the girl's hands swung as if she were a toddler trying to please those around her. The youngest of the assistants, she could barely step over the ropes separating the dig sections.

Nala, only a season younger than Tanna, ran to join her mother Vira. Her container showed signs of the strange destruction that ate at the edges slowly, and eventually, it would crumble in her hands.

There had always been assistants for each dig leader. When Tanna was younger, Jorn had helped as well. If he had sponsored a girl, that child too would have been trained to be dig. Zella glanced up.

Dover watched her.

Even though she couldn't read his expression, she thought she recognized a hint of the pain and confusion she felt.

They would go help their camp set up and prepare the feast. The leaders, and Jorn, would expect them to be part of the group, and not separate. At least there was fresh bison. Dover took her arm as they walked back to the camp area. He would be beside her where he belonged.

# Chapter 7

The broken wide hard path of the ancestors stretched out in front of them. Until recently, no villa had crossed it. Tanna hoped to follow it back down to Almond without using their regular trail.

She stepped forward and peeked through the underbrush. Instead of expected dense undergrowth, it was more like the path she and Robin had encountered the day before. Grass, trees, and bushes had been cleared from the ancestor's boundary that protected the villas. She covered a gasp and backed up.

Unrecognized voices, and a strange high-pitched sound, carried down the path. Both moved faster than a normal walking speed. So fast, they had to be running. At that running speed, talking would be impossible.

Her arms waved, and eyes opened wide, afraid to speak aloud. Tanna turned and directed Robin to run. She also signed to Logan and Kol to run at her heels and cover her footprints.

Rusty ran nearest to Tanna, with Uden the furthest away.

Soon, the voices had almost reached where they were, on that parallel path.

The boy Tanna carried made a slight gurgling sound, nothing to attract a human's attention. If the babies cried, they could be caught.

Racing on, she glanced from side to side to be sure Robin and Rusty were with her. The Grass Sea hid Uden.

The voices faded away. There had been no sound of dogs. So hopefully, there had been none to smell them, or Logan and Kol. Of course, Webbel dogs would know their scent, and not send a danger signal to their caretakers. Then again, the Webbel dogs could be quiet because they were stalking them. Or, they might not even be Webbel dogs.

She couldn't run much longer in the intense midday heat.

Rusty fell behind.

With a slight sound to Robin, she veered toward Rusty. They collapsed on the ground, panting and trying to catch their breath.

Robin slid down beside them.

Uden limped towards them, Logan on one side, Kol on the other. Grass and dust covered her clothes and hair. Corandra cried softly. "I fell. You will have to go on without me."

"No way," Robin said.

"You have to."

"No Uden. Who would feed the other baby? We would never leave anyone to die!" Tanna petted Logan and Kol.

"Robin couldn't carry me far. We have over a two-month journey. And that's not even to Lava."

Robin handed Uden the water gourd. "Drink, and stay quiet. We all need to rest and be quiet."

Logan and Kol rested beside them, tongues lolling from the heat. The hair on their backs stood up straight. They stared east, in the direction of the ancestor's path. The wind blew from that direction towards them.

"Tanna and I will check it out," Robin whispered.

He took her hand, and they crawled through the underbrush, waving the dogs to wait. It was only a few body lengths of space under cover.

Camel heads peeked over the tops of the tall prairie grass. Though rarely seen, camels existed in a few small herds on the plains. Only six adult animals, and one baby appeared in this herd. Their beauty was mostly in their height, as they towered above the tallest grass. They could see most predators, and avoid them. Their appearance and attitude were less than friendly; even the wild horse herds would run from them.

One enormous camel bleated softly. She sat down and leaned to one side.

The other camels walked out of view.

After few more bleats, the heavy camel opened its mouth and breathed while shifting her hind legs.

Rusty crawled up beside them.

Legs appeared out from under the camel's tail, covered in liquid. Soon, the head and neck appeared, and slid down to the ground. Hind legs followed.

The mother turned around to sniff her baby. It made a few sounds as it tried to stand, unsteady on its wobbly, knobby legs. The baby reached up and took its first meal.

Tanna and Robin watched the new mom and baby.

Rusty kicked her heels in the grass glancing from baby camel to her baby brother.

Kol and Logan guarded Uden, Corandra, and the boy.

Grass rustled. A roar echoed across the plains.

Tanna glanced to the south.

A yellowish-brown head with a dark mane, peeked into the clearing that held the mother and newborn camel.

Uden and Rusty couldn't outrun it.

She and Robin couldn't either.

Where there was one, there might be more. They flattened further in the grass.

The lion jumped and grabbed the new mother camel in a locked embrace.

Mother camel kicked and screamed.

Baby camel backed away, unsure of what was happening. Unsteady on its feet, hind legs slipped, and it bleated.

Mother camel fell to the ground.

The lion wrestled on her back, working his jaws tighter around her neck. When the mother camel no longer struggled, he roared. He tore a mouthful of flesh from the mother camel's neck, which splattered bright red blood all over the brown grass.

The other camels were long gone.

Except one.

The dead mother's newborn waited and called, as the lion devoured her.

The lion's mane was small, so he must not have won a territory. If they waited, and they didn't have much choice, maybe they could catch a little fresh meat.

Morning crept by as they lay on the grass. They watched the lion, and waited, until he was ready to leave.

Kol and Logan stayed close by. They were quiet and fully alert. Only the dozing lion drew their attention.

Baby camel cried occasionally.

The lion stood up, roared, and then ambled off.

"Rusty, go to Uden and the babies. We will be back," Robin whispered.

Robin grabbed Tanna's hand, and they ran to the remains of the mother camel. There was a good amount of meat. He skinned it, and used the hide, to wrap a few chunks of meat.

The baby waited nearby, watching them.

Tanna reached out her hand toward it.

It reached its nose closer, almost to her.

"Hurry," Robin whispered. "The camels may have alerted hunters."

She led him back to the hollow Uden rested in.

The baby camel walked up to them, and nuzzled Corandra.

Rusty walked over and stroked its nose.

"It shouldn't be this friendly," Tanna said.

Robin glanced at the camel baby as he tied the hide and meat tighter. "I think it imprinted on us. I know it saw us, and the lion did too. All the more reason to be gone."

Kol and Logan appeared asleep, lying on their sides. Ears perked up, they didn't stand. Kol rolled over as if he could sleep all day.

"Come on Uden, we have to go," Robin said.

"I can't go on."

"We aren't going on. We're going back."

Uden's faced paled even more than it already was.

"No, not all the way. Erin can help us. Trust me. You can lean on me and Tanna. We'll reach the cow lodge soon." Robin reached out to help her up.

Uden groaned as her ankle touched the ground.

"It's not too far," Tanna said. "We can be there by mid-afternoon, even going slow."

"You sure you know where we are?" Uden looked into Robin's eyes.

"Yes. We gather berries beyond that tree." Robin placed Corandra's cradleboard on Tanna's back, and Rusty had to carry her brother.

It was slow going at first. The ground was bumpy, and Robin couldn't push Uden too fast.

The camel baby stumbled along behind them.

They had to rest frequently. After a regular one march, the walls of the cow lodge appeared through the grasses.

"Oh good, the camel baby followed us," Robin said.

"He will give us food." Uden moaned as her ankle touched the ground. She slid down between Robin and Tanna against the wall.

"No," Robin said. "He provides us with cover. His prints make this look like an odd camel trail. We can't feed him though."

"We won't be safe in the cow lodge," Uden said.

"Not for long." Tanna drained her water gourd.

"What do you know about Webbel?" Robin asked Rusty as he sat back on his heels and looked at the silent child.

"They have many settlements. Mills, Shells, Kla, Water, and Hills. I think there are more. Don't have as many people. Tiny groups, like us four."

"Do you know how they took control of Shells and Mills?"

She reached out to the young camel who bleated, begging.

"Here Rusty, give it some water. We will refill soon." He tossed

her a water gourd.

Rusty held it up and let the water drip into the camel's mouth.

Water wasn't food. No nutrients. It didn't seem possible the baby could live without his mother.

They staggered to their feet, lifted the babies and gatherboards to their backs, and helped Uden up. The cow lodge entrance wasn't far off.

Kol and Logan's tails wagged. Someone was nearby. Someone they knew and trusted.

Tanna's heart raced.

A bleat echoed. A sheep herd was nearby.

They waddled into view through the grass. Erin strolled through the opening behind them.

Tanna let out a sigh of relief.

The baby camel had slowed behind them, dazed and unsteady. He now bleated and raced forward.

Rusty laughed as the camel tried to find a mother camel among the sheep.

Erin stepped back and covered her chest.

"It's okay, Erin. Poor baby. We saw him born, and his mom killed and eaten by a lion. He's starved," Robin said.

"And how are you going to feed him?" Erin asked.

"A water gourd of sheep's milk," Tanna said.

Erin stared at the camel and sheep. "Okay. Let's go on in the cow lodge though." She turned the small sheep herd back the way she had come and the group followed.

"What happened to Uden?" Erin asked.

"She fell in a prairie dog hole while we were running," Robin said.

Erin leaned against one of the grazing sheep. "Not good to be running out here. Are you going to Almond?"

"Yes. Things are changing fast," Tanna said.

Erin eyed each of them, and the camel.

"Running away from, or to something. I can't tell. I wish I could help you," Erin said.

The baby camel nibbled at the sheep, making them jump and bleat.

Erin directed the sheep into the cow lodge. She walked over to her cows on the right side of the entrance.

"Ladies, I knew you'd wait. You have company. Betty, do you want a walk?" Erin walked through the cows, directing them, and patting them as she talked. The camel bleated and ran for one cow

with a calf beside it. The camel lay down and stretched for the cow's udder.

The cow glanced around, pawed once, and went back to chewing her cud.

One cow, apparently Betty, followed Erin back to the gate.

"She should do. You can go on."

Rusty ran to the baby camel and patted it.

"Uden can ride Betty. She's the fastest cow, and she's the one I ride out here."

"I didn't know anyone rode the cows," Tanna said. Goddess Amber wouldn't approve.

Erin grinned. "We watch out for lions from their backs when the herds are not in the villa. Especially during the walks."

"Come on, Uden. I'll help you up," Erin said.

Robin and Erin helped pale-faced Uden up onto the cow's back.

"Is it okay?" Tanna asked.

"Sure. Strange though," Uden said.

"Thanks," Robin said. "We better be going now. We have to reach Almond."

"Be careful out there. Lots of roamers," Erin said.

"I never heard mom or Jorn mention any." Tanna adjusted the gatherboard on her back and took the baby from Rusty.

"Oh, there are many camps. I check them out occasionally." Erin gazed off into the distance.

"Anywhere particular?" Tanna asked.

"Anywhere they can hide. I need to tend the sheep. Good luck."

Erin turned to the sheep and walked off, shooing them this way and that as they bleated, walking on down the cow lodge wall.

"I guess we leave the baby camel." Robin handed Corandra up to Uden.

She pulled the cradleboard to her back without looking at her daughter.

"I'll miss it," Rusty said. "Can I come back and see it?"

"Soon. If all goes well." Tanna fluffed Rusty's curls.

Robin watched Erin off in the distance. "She knows something. What, I don't know."

They walked back through the cow lodge gate, and lifted the blocks into place behind them.

Uden rode the cow.

Betty seemed content to follow them back toward the path to their winter villa.



Tanna listened for any unusual sound. Every scurrying of feet, from the tiny mouse running out of their way, to a distant lion's roar as it caught its meal startled them. This heightened awareness of her surroundings was even more than Tanna was used to. She preferred to relax with her dogs and Zella in the villa.

Robin had walked ahead and led Rusty and the dogs.

Tanna lost track of how long they had been walking.

Uden grew pale from the pain.

The dog's tongues lolled and ears drooped.

Tanna stumbled along, keeping the buzzing flies behind Betty's tail almost out of reach. Carrying her gatherboard and a newborn was more weight than she was accustomed to. No wonder new mothers often stayed behind in the villas for the summer.

Robin paused.

Betty's tail whisked into her face, as Tanna tumbled into the mass of flies. She struggled to keep her footing, and the unnamed baby, upright in her arms.

Robin had parted the tall grass boundary leading into Almond villa.

A calm, harmonious villa, Almond wouldn't stand a chance if Orid leered at the newly gen twos there. Would Almond villa be as it had always been? Or, had Webbel influenced them?

The people of the villa stared as they stepped out of the Grass Sea.

Tanna held Rusty's hand, and the two babies in their cradleboards babbled at each other.

A few stared at Uden on Betty's back.

Betty ignored them all and chewed grass.

## Chapter 8

Songs and tales circulated around the fire.

Zella heard the sounds without the words. Dover was nearby. They both missed their apprentices. It would be a long lonely night without Tanna and Robin to talk to. All they had was each other.

While trying not to appear obvious, Zella observed the group. There were easily one hundred and seventy people here, plus the seventy divided between the winter villas. Far more than their custom allowed. The ancestors had made it clear how dangerous it was for groups be too large in any one area. They had to be careful to not anger the Goddess Amber. She simply wasn't nice when she felt they had too many people.

It had happened once. Her first memory, barely old enough to follow the dogs to the stream that flowed by their villa.

Then, the villas were about their current size, if Webbel had been honest about their current size. Several roamers had arrived at Lava villa. They had taken them in. Lava were the first to catch the devastating illness that Shims barely stopped. It wiped out a large portion of all five villas.

Zella shivered. Her own mother and sponsor, both sick, begged her to track down Quan and the Shims villa, who were collecting medicinal plants before the winter storms. She had spent days tracking with her dogs. They kept losing the scent of the Shims villa in the dust storms that were worse that season than anyone could remember.

That experience had never left her. Loneliness as she searched for help. Helplessness when her dogs lost the scent of the Shims villa. When she returned with the healers, her sponsor was dead; and her mother a skeleton, barely hanging on.

She glanced over at Dover, and he shook his head. The four villas knew. There was no need to remind the fifth villa. It might be dangerous.

He came to her and held her close while she cried on his shoulder. He had been her first choice for a sponsor for her child. Then, her baby son had died. She had never wanted to be with him again, out of fear. Now though, she did. The closeness and warmth would feel good tonight.

He held out his hand. She placed hers in his, and they walked off together, out of the happy group.

Traces of concern flickered on many faces in the firelight. Emotions fluttered under the apparently happy faces glancing their way, then back at the fire. Zella was looking for distress, so it might be there, or it might be something else entirely.

As they reached her sleeping place, Naom woke up and rolled over. Dover's two dogs arrived as well, sniffing for food. The people had feasted well. The hungry dogs guarded the pit's perimeter.

Blake said it was to protect them from the roamers, who had increased. At the last few trades, he had made many changes to the way they lived and worked at the pits. Almost as if he made the rules, and not the whole council of villas.

Zella realized now, how subtle they had been. Something new each season, and no one noticed. They could no longer go west of the dig lodge, or south of the circle. Even the fishing trip to Footprint Lake was monitored last trade meeting, or maybe even further back.

She pulled out her gatherboard and handed Naom some food.

Dover fed his two dogs, and they sat down together, to talk.

Far into the night, Zella woke up, Dover's hand on her shoulder. Something must have startled him. She didn't hear anything.

Something wasn't right.

Naom whined nearby.

The ground shook under her hands. It could be the Mad Gods. It could be bison. Or, she shuddered at the thought, it could be Rio.

The movement calmed. It wasn't bison, or it would continue to rumble.

A breeze blew in the grass behind them. Dover crawled to the edge of the sleeping area. Clouds obscured the night sky. There was no moonlight, and little starlight.

Something created light near the pits, the ones they had dug in last season. Not the ones they would dig in at sun up.

Someone stepped out of the dark dig lodge. The person led two other people, probably men from the shape of their outfit, to the unusual lighted area.

A figure crawled towards their sleeping area in the dark of night.

Zella stifled a scream. She grabbed her spear and knife, and so did Dover. They grabbed rocks and stacked them close.

The shorter grasses parted.

Jorn's head and shoulders pushed through. He crawled up to them and sat beside them. He and Dover whispered.

"What's going on?" Dover said.

"Good thing you left when you did. The later drinks were bad.

People are sleeping too sound."

"What do you think they put in them?"

"A sleeping herb most likely. Somehow they have lights, that aren't fire. Not sure what they are. Also, several people came out of the dig lodge, when only one went in. I don't like it."

"We can't leave. They'd know we know," Zella said.

"We have to keep watch. At least one person awake at night. I am sending a few hunters back to find Tanna and Robin." Jorn glanced back at the eerie scene.

"Dover, is someone is sick with something and has to be kept watch over?"

"Sure. One of the Almond villa women injured herself cutting bison meat yesterday. I am sure the pain must be most excruciating at night." Dover reached for his gatherboard.

"I'll stay here. It'll be daylight soon."

"If you saw us, did anyone else?"

Jorn laughed silently. "Not likely. I sent my dog up here to wake up Naom." He stayed beside her as Dover hurried off to check on the injured Almond villa member.

Zella and Jorn watched closely, though they didn't talk.

Dover would see something as he got closer to the unnatural fire. He dashed to the Almond sleeping area and checked on the woman. He glanced around, and hurried to where he should have been sleeping. While searching through a basket, he bent over. To observe without being noticed, was a skill he knew well from healing people.

He dodged sleeping people back to the Almond villa member and wrapped her arm. The strange light glowed off to his right.

Soon, he crept back, and huddled down beside them. "They have fires in small containers. I'm not sure how they have containers that can safely hold fire and let the light out."

"Did you see the two men they took over there?" Zella asked.

Dover moved his gatherboard. "I saw their faces. They were extremely pale. I have no idea who they are. Something was vaguely familiar about one though. I've seen those haunted eyes somewhere."

Jorn tapped dried blades of grass on the ground. "Rest. I'll watch. I need to think anyway."

Trying to relax wouldn't work. It was too unusual. Tanna wasn't by her side. Even Jorn didn't act like the normal leader he always had been. Staring back at that unnatural glowing fire. Her eyes didn't

close as thoughts, fears, and worries circled faster than buzzards on an old carcass.

## Chapter 9

Tanna waited on someone in Almond to say something, anything.

No one said a word. Grandmothers and grandsponsors, a few new mothers with newborn infants, and a few children waited. One young girl's body waved in the gentle breeze.

At least she knew them all. She stepped out of the tall grass, into the clearing.

Two men she didn't recognize appeared around the side of the rock walls. The walls protected Almond villa from winter's chilly winds. Walls couldn't protect them now.

Tanna gulped. Trouble was here as well. Marin hadn't said anything about roamers, or Webbel men, in their villa. The others couldn't run. Staying would mean offering herself to Goddess Amber's protection, as Zella had always done for Lava villa.

It was too soon.

Burdened with an infant meant escape was impossible. Better to fight here, than run to Klapit to face Orid.

Robin stepped forward. "We are travelers. One of our group is hurt. She needs rest. Can anyone help us?"

All of the Almond people knew him, except perhaps the infants.

The two men stood, legs far apart, hands on hips, and glared at them. One grabbed Glenna, a young girl Tanna barely knew. He jerked her up against his front and held her tight.

Glenna's face paled, and she went limp in the man's grasp.

One gen four grandmother pointed toward the treasury, usually used for sorting summer vegetables and storing food for the villa. Almond villa even stored their drums and flutes there.

A new mother who had reached gen two only last trade meeting, took Corandra from Uden. She reached for the unnamed in Tanna's arms. A hint of recognition shown in the woman's eyes as she glanced at Rusty.

Tanna didn't want to let go of the boy. A slight nod of her eye, and she handed the baby over. She patted Rusty on the shoulder and followed Robin to the treasury to help take care of Uden.

As soon as Robin had Uden in the treasury, he held his finger to his lips. Uden and Tanna watched his soundless lips behind the finger, pointed away from the open entry. "Two unknowns, good. Must guess position."

Aloud Robin said, "Need wraps please. Can you check my gatherboard?"

Tanna reached into the gatherboard beside him and pulled out thin strips of old woven cloth to wrap Uden's swollen ankle now. How they would make it home safe, she had no idea. Home might not be safe now either. In fact, they might have runners already sent to Lava villa. It was only a fast march away.

If something happened to the infants, they would never know pain or sorrow. That was all she could hope for, for them. Her heart fluttered as she thought of the infant who had gazed at her with such mesmerizing eyes. Rusty had not joined them.

Glenna didn't look well. If those men had hurt her, it would be serious. Such a crime against Goddess Amber had never occurred in her life, and Zella had never spoken of crimes against girls barely one-third through their first gen. Marin wasn't here to invoke the law of the villa, nor could they gather the council. The council had enough to worry about at Klapit. Those memories of the odd paths had shown that. Only the council could determine what Orid and Blake were doing.

She covered a gasp. They were on the council too. At least Blake was. Orid was the same gen status as Robin, a gen two for two trade meetings. If the council became divided, Goddess Amber would be angered and wake the Mad Gods, shaking the gardens from the land.

Uden held out her hand. "You will have to go on without me. Leave me here, with Corandra."

"And the other baby?" Tanna whispered.

Uden turned her head as Robin tucked the last of the wrap in tight. "Go now."

"Where would we go?" Tanna whispered. She wouldn't leave her behind, unless there was a plan to save them all. Glenna's eyes had shone pain. A pain that had only be told in tales of the ancients.

Uden closed her eyes and didn't reply.

"No one stays behind." Robin refilled his gatherboard.

Shouts sounded in the camp.

Tanna shuddered. That voice was familiar.

"Where are the strangers? Let me see them."

Tanna's heart pounded as footsteps came their way.

The treasury windsun was pushed aside, and Orid poked his head through.

An evil grin flashed across his face.

"No one goes anywhere, especially not those two delicacies."

He grinned as he reached in, as if to grab at them, and then turned away.

Tanna let her breath out slowly. No escape now.

Uden panted, her cheeks red, and face pale.

Rusty, Glenna, and the other new mothers were in danger.

Something rustled at the back of the tent.

Tanna stifled a scream as a sunlit hole appeared at the back of the treasury.

Rusty crawled in and pulled the two infants through. "Scared," she mouthed.

"Nowhere to go." Tears flowed down her cheeks.

Tanna comforted her.

Rusty's sobs slowed as she sprawled on the ground. She reached over to her baby brother's face and traced it with her fingers. "Where is safe now?"

"Maybe nowhere," Tanna said. "One of the tales of the ancestors, is about when no one felt safe anywhere. When you didn't know who your friends were, or your enemies."

Tears welled in her eyes as she turned to Robin. "I don't want enemies."

Robin touched her shoulder gently. "Few people do. Sadly, it's those who do want enemies who create enemies for everyone."

Dusk deepened in the treasury.

Shouts sounded outside. "Move along, there!"

"On, into the center!"

Tanna pulled the windsun back enough to peek out.

Men with spears pushed and prodded the gen four adults, new mothers, and early gen one toddlers of Shims and Tuttle villas. Many stumbled. Tunics and shawls, torn from spear jabs, fluttered in the wind. A sandal broke and slipped off a toddler's foot, as a mother held his hand and clutched her newborn close to her chest.

Robin crawled up behind her.

An elderly man stumbled along at the back of the line.

"Hurry up old man. You are holding up the group."

The scout jabbed the grandsponsor in the back.

"He shouldn't be walking at all." Robin's arms tensed against her back.

"Is that the last of them?" Orid asked.

"All of this group. We don't think any escaped as we surrounded them."



"Did any fight?" Orid asked.

"Not really. They came along peacefully enough. Cried a lot, the babies." The voice of this Webbel was vaguely familiar to Tanna, though she couldn't put a name to it.

Robin stood on tiptoe above her as he glanced at the nearly two dozen people in the center of the lodges. He recited names under his breath, though she couldn't quite catch them.

He pulled her back and sat down. Holding up three fingers, he grinned.

Three had escaped. Though where they were, and how they would find help, she didn't know. She glanced back through the gap.

"Where do you want these young mothers, so we can visit them later?" One of the scouts laughed as he jerked a young woman holding an infant back against his chest. The toddler pulled loose and ran for his sandal.

"Send them and their brats into the treasury over there. The old people into this lodge. We'll wait on Lava to arrive. The scouts should be here with them soon," Orid said.

The treasury windsun opened, and three women and babies were shoved inside. Toddlers followed wiping their eyes. The women saw Robin, and relief flooded their faces.

One of them mouthed, "What now?"

Robin mouthed back. "We wait on Lava."

Aloud he said, "Are you okay?"

The three women sat down against the wall of the treasury, next to the pile of drums.

Rusty sat up and stared at them. Quiet tears rolled down her dusty cheeks.

One of the women glanced at Robin and pointed between her legs. Dried blood and fluid had left tracks down her legs, and on her tunic.

They had taken longer than Orid expected because the scouts had raped her on the way. Tanna couldn't do anything for her. She knew what Orid was like. She shivered at the memory of his touching her last summer.

Robin reached into his gatherboard, and handed the woman some leaves and bark to chew. Hopefully, the physical pain would lessen.

The woman nodded her thanks and reached for her water gourd.

Tanna tried to remember who had remained at Lava villa.

Several adults and one child with a deformed leg had stayed behind.

He would never be able to walk this far. Would Orid's scouts abandon him alone with only dogs to find food for him?

The noise level increased outside again.

"Here Orid, here is our group!"

Orid laughed loud and long. "Good. Send the old people into that lodge, with the others. What did you bring that kid for? You should have left him for the vultures."

"Naw, he rode on my shoulders. He may be good for something."

"Well, if you want him, keep him with you. I don't want to see him."

Tanna peeked out the windsun again, as one of the men reached the entry to the other lodge.

A fourth gen grandsponsor of several of Zella's gen, turned and said, "Orid, I thought I trained you well. You wanted to learn, you said."

A spear jabbed the elderly man in the back and leg. Blood trickled from the wound.

Orid laughed again. "What I wanted to learn was far more than you could ever teach, now off with you."

His arm waved toward the scouts as he turned toward the treasury. "Send the three women there."

The grandsponsor lowered his head and shuffled into the lodge.

Orid aimed another spear for his legs.

Blood tricked down both legs.

What did Orid want to learn from him? He was a simple gardener, and had rarely gone on to the trades. His tales of the ancestors had given her dreams. In fact, he was the person who had reminded her that people once rode horses, and kept them as pets. Then, no one ate them.

"Now to see what this young boy is doing with all of these women over here. Can't let him have all the fun."

Tanna jumped back.

Rusty was as pale as the other women. She grabbed her brother and slipped behind a container of winter windsuns. Nowhere for the adults to hide, and none would anyway, if it meant danger to the others.

The windsun opened, and Orid's jeering face appeared. He ushered the three women and their babies into the treasury, patting their bottoms as they walked past him. His arm stretched in and made a rude gesture.

A shout from outside interrupted his entrance. "Orid, we need

you. There is a messenger from Blake."

He leered at each of them as they trembled. "I'll be back. Don't you worry. Relax and have some fun. Not too much." He shook his finger at Robin.

Before long, the windsun opened. Glenna and Yananda, two young girls, came in with food and water. Both looked at the ground, to hide the tears in their eyes.

They were both known to hold their heads high, as was expected of all women, until their backbones curved in fourth gen, and even then, they tried to hold them high. If those men had raped women well before they reached gen two, Goddess Amber would rage.

Tanna reached her hand out for the food. "Thanks, can you join us?"

The girls sat down in the center and passed the food plate around. Yananda glanced at Rusty, about the same age.

"With you," Glenna whispered. "Dark." They grabbed the empty food plate, and ran out of the treasury. The windsun closed back behind them.

Tales told of a time when men had been allowed to hurt women, and the consequences. The people would never allow abuse of women to occur. They would stand and fight Orid and the scouts to restore peace and Goddess Amber's blessing to the villas.

Shouting echoed outside. Hopefully, Orid would stay busy for a while. It would be night before long.

Eight women, one man, one child, two toddlers, and seven babies huddled in the treasury. At least two women too hurt to run. Not much they could do to protect themselves. Luckily, she and Robin had their spears, and Uden's.

Orid hadn't seen their weapons.

The power of the ancestor's tales would save them. Almond's musical gifts, Lava's ancestral tales, Tuttle's knowledge woven into the cloth worn by every member of the community, and Shims in the healing they carried from villa to villa.

# Chapter 10

Sleep had not returned until nearly dawn. Zella ambled toward the dig pit. She glanced at the area the people had dug in during the night. Somehow, the ground appeared dry, and undisturbed. How could that be?

Investigation would have to wait. She walked on to her roped off digging area. The usual joy at mining for useful buried artifacts was overshadowed by the scene during the night.

Facing the bushes, she chose where she wanted to focus on digging. Dover would be able to see her. Lumpy ground was hidden by apparent flatness. A few bits from previous generations peeked through the ground cover.

Tales of the gen four grandmothers said Klapit had been sorted and sifted entirely three or four times. Everyone knew there weren't many more seasons of digging left here. So little had been found in the last few seasons, it wasn't worth the effort. Which was why they only worked the ground at Fall and Spring Trades.

Maybe they weren't digging far enough. Digging deep brought its own dangers, as the walls of dirt could collapse on the diggers. Even deeper, there were tales of strange vapors that made people sick. It took so long to dig by hand, that they barely scratched the surface before they had to close the holes again. They couldn't leave the pits open between seasons either. In the early spring when the ground was damp, and late summer, after the stormy season washed more dirt away. Summer storms would throw loose dirt back in the left-over holes, and break down the walls. And winter brought animals that could fall in and die, leaving a stinky, wet mess to be cleaned up at Spring Trade.

Zella loosened the damp dirt with her broken metal digging tool. An edge broke off. She sat back and looked at the crumbling tool. Not much of a tool. The best she had. No one knew how to make this gift of the ancestors, and few had been found for several seasons now. She stabbed the dirt.

Dover wasn't making much progress either. Most people used bone shovels, or rock shovels for daily use. Metal scraps were harder to find, and tended to crumble between gatherings. Hopefully, they would find a few new pieces of metal this digging season.

She turned the piece of metal she was using as a trowel around.

Jagged edges pulled the dirt away with little effort. It had been ripped from a larger piece of metal by something far more powerful than she could imagine. The ancients had used this piece of metal for something, then split it up and buried it here in the mines for their descendants. It had raised indentions across one side. They looked like letters that did not form a word or phrase. What could "L L D" possibly mean?

Random letters on a piece of metal, all consonants, and no vowels, not a word. It must have meant something to someone. Other undecipherable codes had been found, often on the tools of the ancients similar to the ones she and Dover carried. What would they find? Her excitement rose. She shoved the trowel deep into the ground.

Glancing up, she saw Dover looking at her. The first day was always digging the old dirt away, dirt that had been moved all over the pit area. Things buried in the top few hand widths, even an arm length down usually disintegrated, as bugs and other mammals chewed them to bits. Lower, though, valuables survived. Bugs and burrowing mammals rarely dug far below the surface, particularly if they could find food close to the air.

Her trowel struck something hard. A shard of pitted bone stuck out of the dirt. It could be human or animal. She placed it in her digging artifact gourd.

Calen would gather everything they found, and redistribute it among the groups if it was useful.

A bird tweeted behind her. Dover waved his trowel left to right, and then quickly lowered it to the ground to dig again.

Calen wasn't nearby. She reached into the artifact gourd and pulled the bone back out, hiding it in her tunic. It could be made into a sewing needle. Or, perhaps, Dover had a plan for it.

As the day wore on, she found a few interesting bits of metal and plastic, dropping about half into the collecting artifact gourd. None of the dig team had found much. Scraps of artifacts, not enough to do anything with, or help the villas. They had barely scratched the surface. There might be something lower, a few arm lengths down.

The rest of the villa members prepared the bison drying racks, and trimmed the meat. Field cuts were too thick to dry properly, though they worked to move the meat to camp. It would take the meat many days to dry, if the sun shone warm and bright.

The rest of the camp could help dig, instead of hunting this season. It might mean traveling to Footprint Lake to fish earlier.

Zella relaxed at Footprint Lake between dig seasons. While others hunted and fished, she strolled the shore, contemplating her dreams, the past, artifacts, and how they could shape the future. Often, her tales of what might have been were so intriguing the children followed her to listen as she pointed out how the rocks went together near the shore, or the lines of trees angled. Fishing, or hunting nutria, weren't among her skills. Telling tales and listening were. Nutria stew was delicious, and filling, a perfect summer meal. Her favorite meal to cook. So much so, everyone brought her nutria to have a share in her special stews.

Something cold and wet touched Zella's hand. She jumped.

Naom was beside her. The dog whined.

Most of the camp seemed to be preparing for the evening meal.

Dover came over to help her stand up. He waited as she dusted off her legs.

The group gathered around the fire pit as they ate bits of bison and a few left-over vegetables from last summer. Fresh green beans might be ready in the Klapit gardens when they returned from fishing and hunting nutria.

Blake stood up in the center of the crowd. "Please listen carefully. We are going to prepare for another hunt in two days. By then, all the bison you have hunted will be drying. The Webbel gardeners can stay to fend off the wild animals, and help the digging teams while you go hunting."

Voices clamored. People had obviously hoped to rest and enjoy a lengthy trade meeting. They didn't have many relaxing days together, and the days it took the bison to dry would be a real treat.

Blake held up his hand. "We must be prepared for the winter. The bison should be moving toward Almond and Lava summer camps. Perhaps, you may decide to stay there for the summer and return for your cured bison later, when you pass back through."

Deep grumbles resounded from the people.

"We should have kept going then, I guess."

"Why did we stop here? We could have had a full summer meeting on the shoreline!"

"No games and taletelling?"

Blake waited for the volume to lower. "There will be taletelling and games. There will be plenty of meat with two hunts. Three bison is never enough. You know we need eight or more. You can do it!"

The grumbling continued.

Fishing nets and spears would have to be checked, cleaned, and

prepared. Another hunt would give them fewer days to trade ideas, and work together.

Zella didn't trust Blake. This wasn't normal. Usually, some of the women, and most of the children, stayed behind during a hunt. Would the hunters return and find the meat from the first three bison already gone? She and Dover would be there, watching it as much as they could. Lives depended on it.

# Chapter 11

Darkness crept into the treasury. Outlines faded.

Tanna hoped there would be enough moonlight to see who was on which side. Orid's scouts could be hiding anywhere.

The people of Almond were not in the treasury with them. If the scouts went after those women first, would there be screams? Or would the strange leering roamers come to the treasury at dark?

She shivered. Orid was a nightmare, one she longed to drown under the waters of Footprint Lake.

None of them had ever fought anyone before. Fighting would awaken Goddess Amber's anger and destroy the fragile communities again, as had occurred in the tales. If Rusty and the infant were a sign, she'd have to follow what she thought Goddess Amber wanted. The woman from Shims had to be avenged within three days, if they didn't want the wrath of Goddess Amber to shake their villas apart. The council were too far away, and busy with Blake.

The noise level in the villa died down, as people settled in for the night.

Tanna reached for Robin's hand.

Logan and Kol had not appeared in the treasury, or been seen through the windsun peephole.

It was quiet. Too quiet. Zella had brought her on trips for medicinal herbs from Shims, and they had stayed at Almond overnight. Almond was never quiet at night.

What was missing?

Tanna clutched Robin's hand. She searched her memory for an answer.

The nightly flutes were missing. Until they sounded, no Almond adult, or child, would sleep.

She smiled and squeezed Robin's hand again.

A low, long drumbeat vibrated through the night air. Only those from Almond camp bothered to learn the meanings of the drumbeats. Everyone else simply enjoyed the music they produced.

Snuffling under the treasury wall startled Tanna. The board Rusty had crept under lifted up. Kol's scratched nose slipped through.

The drumbeats grew louder. Other drum and flute melodies joined them.



Tanna grabbed her gatherboard and spear. She lay on her side and peeked out the bottom of the board where Kol had lifted it.

Dusk faded into darkness.

The board lifted almost enough for her to slide through. Robin's hand on her foot sent tingles up her spine. Different from the tingles of Orid's voice or touch. Their community must be rescued from Orid and the scouts.

Tanna crawled up the side of the treasury, toward the open center of Almond villa.

Robin was right behind her.

Logan waited at the treasury corner.

Tanna peeked into the empty meeting area between lodges. A fire burned in the middle as the last rays of sunlight drifted toward the west.

Drumbeats grew stronger. Closer, and further away, as if that were possible. Almond villa created echoes that bounced off the wind walls. It sounded like they had left several players behind.

There were nearly sixty people between the four villas, and seven, or eight of the roamer scouts. Most of those left behind were elderly, new mothers, and young children. They wouldn't be much of a fighting force.

"Shut that noise up! We are trying to sleep!"

Tanna smiled at the frustration and anger in Orid's voice. No telling where he was. Though the voice seemed close, sound travelled differently here, thanks to the walls.

Drumbeats grew louder, and quicker, calling together all that were awake. As if anyone was asleep.

In the starlight, the moon began to rise.

Orid dragged Glenna's mother, naked, into the middle beside the fire. "I said shut up that noise! Or I'll make you wish you had!"

He flung the young woman down on her back, and put his foot on her leg. His evil grin scanned between the lodges.

They had to move before he hurt the woman. Or hurt her again.

No woman from the four villas would allow herself to be treated badly. Nor, would any man allow a woman to be hurt in his presence. Unless, he wanted to join the roamers. Permanently.

Drumbeats crashed.

Flutes shrilled.

Screams echoed.

Shivers danced down Tanna's back.

The sounds lifted her, and those behind her, to their feet and into

the center of the village.

Orid laughed. "Go back to your lodges. You will all have your chance to be with me. Go now, and be quiet or I'll." He turned to the woman on the ground.

Logan growled.

Orid turned.

Tanna and Robin pointed spears right at him.

"Scouts!"

Pandemonium broke out. People grabbed what looked as if they had been merely twigs, barely able to trip someone. Most of those twigs were solid drumsticks.

Tanna raced forward. There would be no surprise attack. Though the distance was short, the run felt long.

Shouts and screams broke out behind, and all around her.

The woman on the ground was all she cared about.

Logan, growled low in his throat, and raced beside her toward Orid.

Tanna hefted her spear. Almost there. She didn't dare take her eyes off Orid.

If Glenna's mother wasn't frozen in fear, she should be able to crawl away from him.

She pulled her arm back ready to thrust her spear deep into Orid.

"You'll never do it," Orid said. "You haven't even killed a cow or a sheep. You're just a child I played with last trade."

Tanna's anger boiled. She was a gen two now. And not a child last trade. Even Rusty would be insulted by being called a child.

She aimed and thrust her spear at the memories.

He moved aside, laughing. "See you can't do it."

Tanna glanced at the ground.

Glenna's mother was out of the way.

She thrust again, catching his tunic.

Orid laughed and lunged toward her with his bare hands.

She dropped the spear as she stumbled over something behind her.

Orid sneered at her.

Tanna was half sprawled across the ground, her back against something, or someone. Unable to move, or reach her spear, she screamed.

Orid leered above her. Leaning over her, his hands seemed larger than his head, as they moved closer to her face.

Shrieking, she tried to back up. She was on someone's body. Half turned, and paralyzed with fear, she glanced back up at Orid.

Logan jumped on Orid from behind. Teeth bared, he plunged them into Orid's neck. Blood spattered everywhere.

Tanna was covered with blood, as Logan and Orid fell beside her.

Orid's blood puddled in the moonlight.

Logan growled over Orid's body.

Tanna breathed hard and backed away from the two bodies on the ground.

Moaning, breathing, screaming and hurrying feet, flooded through the fear. The fighting was mostly over.

Tanna crawled until she reached something to help her stand.

She wobbled until firmly on her feet and grabbed her spear.

She surveyed the area, trying to see where she was needed.

Orid had eight roamer scouts. At least one was dead. She had tripped over him. The other seven were scattered around on the ground.

People tied them up with rope.

Several who had fought were wounded. A woman cradled her arm. Blood seeped through the tunic, and a girl cried on her lap.

Others, like her, looked around, trying to see if they needed to fight anymore.

Thankfully, there had been enough able-bodied people to fight off the roamer scouts.

Robin, and a few other members of the Shims villa, tended the wounded.

People settled down around the central fire. The wounded shuffled to one side. Orid, and his scouts, tied up nearby.

She drifted over to where Robin checked on the scouts. "Only one died. The one who hurt the old man from your camp. The wounded boy and the old man killed him."

Tears rolled down Robin's cheeks.

"Don't cry, Robin. He deserved to die," one woman said.

"Certainly he did," Robin said. "No due process with them. Who knows how the Goddess will feel now. Or, what terrors she may unleash."

The old man, his wounds recently treated, stumbled up to Robin, and sat beside him. "Robin, these men did not give us due process before they hurt us. Everyone here knew what they did. They all deserve to die."

The grandsponsor put his hand on Robin's arm. "You know how to make it end. So no one suffers anymore."

"Grandsponsor, if this was only a few roamers, yes it would end. It isn't," Robin said.

Orid leered up at Tanna.

Logan had severed several veins in Orid's neck, though not the jugular. He was weak from blood loss. It wouldn't take much. That glare of hatred he shot her. She could end him with a good kick right now.

"Grandsponsor, we need these men as captives. We have no idea what they have done to Zella, to Dover, or the rest of our villas. Who can we trust now?" Her mouth squirmed as she fought to not let Orid see her cry.

The old man slumped to the ground. The fight seemed about out of him. "I hoped I wouldn't live to see a battle between the villas. War is ugly."

"Yes, Grandsponsor, the war tales of old are ugly." A gen four grandmother from Almond villa tottered up and held her hands out to him. "Without war, and its ensuing peace, our ancestors would never have been brought together, and we would not exist. Do you begrudge us our lives, or the beautiful memories we had together?"

The old man smiled. "I wish it could be any other way."

The woman smiled as she pulled his head down to her lap. "So do I. The young hear the tales, and occasionally chose the wrong person as their hero. Occasionally, the evil ones are so embellished the listeners are confused. They must re-live the wars of gens past. If for nothing more than to keep the specter of war, and its consequences, ever present in the memory of the living."

"Goddess Amber must be appeased." Tanna said.

Robin tucked in the wrap on one scout's arm. "For now, we set a watch and rest until morning. We don't know enough."

Kol and Logan guarded the children.

Tanna had covered Rusty, Glenna, and Yananda with a blanket, and watched their eyes close. It had been a long day. As they dozed off to sleep, she left Logan and Kol beside them, on the ground.

No one had wanted to go back into the treasury, or the lodges. They feared not being able to escape. Tanna didn't want to think about it either.

Logan and Kol jumped to their feet barking, as did the other dogs in village. They raced to the side closest to Klapit.

Tanna quivered as she waited for the inevitable. She grabbed

her spear. Who would walk into the firelight? No animal. They would have heard it by now.

Six shadows stretched into the firelight.

Logan and Kol jumped up on their shoulders.

"Down, boys." A familiar voice spoke.

Gel, Haro, and Kleal from Lava ushered two men and a woman from Shims. What were they doing here? She glanced across at Robin, unsure.

He smiled at the three from the Shims villa who had escaped the raid earlier that day.

The Webbel villa could be recruiting from the other villas.

Tanna didn't quite trust them. Spear ready, she waited to hear what they would say.

Others obviously felt the same, with spears, rocks, and sticks in hand, and ready if needed.

The specter of war had awakened.

## Chapter 12

The moon set, and the stars grew brighter. Daybreak soon. Zella's watch had been uneventful, as had Dover's early watch. The dig lodge had been undisturbed.

The hunter's scouts would leave by midmorning. Movement near the food preparation area grabbed her attention. She thought that some people were waking up, to prepare breakfast for the travelers. Glancing away, then back, she realized those people were going elsewhere.

Three people entered the dig lodge. A tiny light flickered inside, barely visible under the entry windsun.

The light disappeared.

The windsun pulled back, and one person stepped out and turned to face the wall before walking off.

No light flickered, other than the moon on the person's hair.

Dover breathed hard beside her. He had seen too.

"We have to go in there," Zella whispered. "I am sure something is odd about that place. I felt so the first day we came."

"See if you can send Naom for a walk in that general direction. I'll crow caw if needed."

Zella pointed. "Naom, search."

Naom meandered off towards the dig area.

Zella strolled through the mingled groups of sleeping people.

Naom was on the other side. She sat down and pointed her face toward the area where Zella would be working later in the day.

When Zella reached her, she patted her head, exaggerating as if the dog were in trouble, in case anyone was watching. As she walked back, she casually threw a bone for Naom. Carelessly, she let it bounce off the wall of the dig lodge.

Naom retrieved it. She sat beside the wall.

Zella approached the entry. With her back to the entry, she attempted to push the entry aside.

It wouldn't move.

This entry was always kept open. Dig leaders used to come here and rest after a long hot day, because the stones were refreshingly cool to lean against.

She sat down to rub Naom's head, as she often did.

The dog gnawed on the bone.

Zella signaled her to follow.

Something was definitely wrong here. Two men were trapped, or hidden, in the dig lodge. No men had been reported missing from the villas. Nor had anyone been to see the council for damage done to another person, or villa.

Not knowing what these men could have done for Blake to allow this to happen, bothered Zella. Jorn had not mentioned any crime, or atonement. Surely, Blake wasn't disregarding the crime and punishment laws. If the Mad Gods were disturbed, and they woke the Rio, the herds might leave the region. Without the herds, the already overcrowded villas would have less food, and sickness would come again.

Zella hurried with Naom back to her sleeping place trying to pretend everything was normal.

It wasn't.

Everything was far from normal. How were the two people, being held in the dig lodge, and why? If the answers didn't come, she would have to find them.

As the hunting scouts gathered that morning for a quick travel meal, the mood was more subdued than usual. Normally, they were loud and looked forward to the active chase. Everyone seemed to sense something was wrong.

Jorn half-smiled at her as he hoisted his gatherboard. A tear glittered in his eye, as he grabbed a piece of drying bison and turned away without a word to her.

The group passed through the opening in the Grass Sea, and were soon invisible. Usually they left camp singing. Songs echoed as the diggers went back to their pits. Not today. The wind barely whispered through the grass.

All of her family and friends were now gone. Except Dover. The world had changed and taken them away. What tale of the ancestors would they meet? If they returned, would the world have changed them?

His hand reached for hers.

They had each other, for now. Zella turned back to the barely turned pits.

Anything could happen on these hunts, and often had. One reason the group usually sang as they walked away was to warn lions of their coming, until they reached an area they were likely to find herd animals. Silently leaving camp wasn't smart, or safe, for those who left, or those left behind.

Zella unconsciously dug through the dirt. Her mind raced, trying

to find a way to protect her family and friends. None appeared in her memories of the tales she had repeated. She sat up on her knees. Tears streamed down her face, as she looked up at the thin, wispy clouds above. "Goddess protect us," she said.

Laughter startled her.

"Don't you know by now, there is no goddess?" Blake said.

"Since you aren't working anyway, why don't you and your friends come with me. You haven't found many useful objects. We can go rest in the shade by the dig lodge." He walked away.

How long had he been watching her? Zella wondered. For that matter, how long had she been staring at the sky? She glanced down at her empty artifact gourd. He was right about one thing; they hadn't found much. Sighing, she turned her artifact gourd over her digging tool, and followed behind Blake with Dover, Varl, Sharel, Vira, and Nala.

Zella and Dover leaned up against the chilly foundation of the dig lodge. The air was already steamy, with a warm breeze blowing through the grasses all around Klapit. A fresh baked bread smell conflicted with the metallic stone odor. With all the warmth surrounding her, an icy shiver raced through her heart as she leaned against the stones of the building and wondered what mysteries it held. She didn't want to find out, at least not with Blake there.

Blake waited until they refreshed themselves from their water gourds before beginning. "The hunters are gone. We all know this pit is empty. It has been mined since the ancestors died. We have taken all they have left for us here."

"We've barely scratched the surface." Varl handed a water gourd to Sharel.

"I am going to send you out in two groups to find a new pit."

Zella's eyes opened wide as everyone else gasped. She knew someday it would come. She had hoped to be the one to initiate it at a council meeting, or even Dover. And the whole group of villas should go together for safety. It would have meant a summer without nutria, or preserved fish, for winter.

"Varl, Sharel, Vira, and Nala, you will go directly west from here. According to some tales we have heard, there should be another pit about five day's march southwest. I'm not sure the exact location. Or even if you will be able to recognize it. The Grass Sea can hide pits the ancestors left us, that haven't been mined. Take your digging tools with you. You may need them to find the actual pit location."

Blake then turned to Zella and Dover. "Since you left your



helpers behind, I will send Calen with you. There should be another pit about three days northwest, according to our villa's tales. I haven't heard of it being mentioned in any other villa's tale, so it must have belonged to the ancestors of Webbel."

"Who will watch the drying bison meat?" Zella said.

Blake laughed. "Don't worry. My villa members who stayed behind to mind the gardens will watch it. Don't worry about digging anymore today. Prepare to leave, as you must go quickly in the morning. Take your dogs with you."

Lava villa had a little-known tale about a place to the northwest. She couldn't quite remember the tale. Her mother had told it once before she left.

The afternoon was spent packing, and wishing she felt safe to hide a few things behind. They usually did during the summer fishing trip. When she was gen one, and her mother was dig leader, that the dig team stayed at the pits all summer long. If only, she could stay here, a solution might come. Zella made sure her digging tool was in her gatherboard, with the empty artifact gourd hanging on the side.

Morning came, and Zella and Dover hugged Varl, Sharel, Vira, and Nala as they set off walking southwest. It would take them many days to find the new pit. And many days to find their way back.

She and Dover turned to wait on Calen.

He stumbled wearily up to them. His huntboard slipped off his shoulder. "Sorry, had to finish packing this morning." Red faced, and panting, in the early morning sunshine, he tried to adjust his huntboard.

Dover faced the northeast, picked up his gatherboard, and pointed out a tiny dot moving in and out among the far, high clouds.

Zella looked up to where he was watching and tried to make out what bird it could be. It disappeared, far off in the direction they were to go.

She tapped her thigh and Naom joined her.

Dover's dogs had gone with Jorn on the hunt.

They started down the path through the Grass Sea toward Footprint Lake, and turned off into the unknown beyond where Blake could hear them. Zella didn't look back.

It was quiet. Klapit would be a hive of activity soon, that much was obvious. Blake, the gardeners, and those unknown people in the dig house were searching for something.

What Webbel were looking for, she had no idea, and wasn't sure she wanted to know. They could be searching for something, or

hiding what they had already found. The bison meat might be gone when they got back. If they got back, she corrected. Calen was a Webbel, and had been told to go with them.

Zella sighed, patted Naom's head, and gave the motion to go ahead and scout a trail. She took off, almost out of sight. Dover walked mostly behind her, saying little. Every now and again, he would step up beside her to remind her he was there.

Calen huffed and wheezed behind them. They paused occasionally to let him catch up. He shouldn't be out of breath. The summer routine meant everyone walked several days. Calen wasn't old enough to be having breathing trouble, that only happened to gen four adults. At one point, she raised her eyebrow when Dover looked at her.

His nod was almost imperceptible.

At least he noticed.

## Chapter 13

Tanna didn't trust the new arrivals. She knew them. Gel was Jorn's preferred advisor. Haro and Kleal were almost gen two apprentice hunters and advisors.

Jorn had seemed quiet for many days before the trip. Gel and Haro had been gone, and returned with no food. Unusual for well-trained hunters. Perhaps they knew more about Webbel's secret activities. Zella, and the gen four members of Lava, had taught her tales of greed and fear. Occasionally, greed took over. For now, she'd watch and listen.

"Join us," Robin said.

Gel nodded, and the six newcomers placed themselves around Orid, and the other bound men.

Their short sleep around the fire pit had been uneasy. The cries and moans of the injured Webbel men, and the injured villa members kept them wakeful.

At the first softening light in the sky, declaring the beginning of a new day, Tanna sat up.

Rusty, nestled beside her, rubbed her eyes.

The sky grew paler, grayish, then whitish, barely enough light to see by. She glanced at the young girl.

Rusty appeared unhurt, only a few scratches. Invisible sores were often the most dangerous. After witnessing the battle, and knowing both her parents were dead, she might give up the will to live.

Tanna didn't know for sure what all had happened to Rusty. Or, what the child may have imagined happening to her. The fear of some of those events could be worse than the actual trauma itself. Some of Orid's roamer scouts had been loose in the villa before Rusty had scrambled into the treasury. If they had hurt her, after all she had been through to reach Zella and Tanna safely, it could lead to deeply scarred memories.

The gen four grandsponsor who had been speared in the back and the leg moaned nearby. So far, he hadn't given up living.

She crawled to his side.

"Tanna, no longer child, you must have the strength." He drew a few deep breaths.

Tanna knew the spear in the back hadn't gone too deep. If the

man had trouble breathing before, the spear had worsened it.

"The strength to go on. For you. And everyone here."

"Do you think Zella, and everyone else is safe?"

He looked up at her. "I cannot know. Only the Goddess knows now, and she isn't saying." He paused to breathe.

Goddess Amber never quit speaking to those she chose, did she?

"I wasn't much of a spiritual leader." He lifted his arm to his head, resting his wrist on his damp brow.

Tanna touched his skill necklace. Both the Shims and spiritual leader charm were well worn from holding while communicating with Goddess Amber.

"I told Quan to go ahead as normal, only leaving a few extra people." His eyes closed as his brow furrowed.

She could be this man someday. With her children and grandchildren gathered around her, or scattered at the whims of the violence Orid had awakened.

"The leaders knew something was wrong. How could I advise them?" He tried to turn his head and winced as a cut reopened and seeped dark blood.

"Grandsponsor you did the best you could."

He struggled to sit up. "No. We didn't do the best we could." He gasped for air. "We broke the command. We kept secrets."

"There are no secrets." She tried to comfort him.

Robin hurried to her and the grandsponsor.

"Grandsponsor, what more could you do? You did as our ancestors did. What more could we ask?"

"Honesty." He breathed hard, laying on his back.

"Honesty in all things. Not keeping secrets, even from children, particularly from young adults." His voice rasped as he drew in sharp breaths.

Robin motioned. He and Tanna pulled the weakened man into an upright position to breath.

The gen four grandmother from Almond who had soothed him last night came up to them, awakened by his cries. She sobbed as she held his hand. "I always loved him. My children and grandchildren know. I don't want him to go like this. Vengeful spirits are always so sad." She held his hand in hers and pulled it to her face.

The grandsponsor didn't move. His breathing slowed to normal, then almost invisible.

"He has given up the will to live. He thinks he failed us. I think he gave us our only hope." A tear winked in Robin's eye. "He did not sponsor Orid or Blake. Nor lead them to their evil ways. He did the best he could."

"Will his spirit haunt us?" Rusty slid up beside them.

Tanna hugged her close. "Let us hope not. Or if he does, may he continue to lead us to peace, as he has always tried to do."

The old man's eyes fluttered.

A baby cried.

Uden curled up, with arms around her own baby, and the unnamed boy.

Tanna turned back to the old man, the grandsponsor of so many people. She couldn't tell if he was breathing.

"I gave him some medicine to soothe him," Robin said. "His external injuries won't heal until the internal ones do."

Yananda and Glenna pulled Rusty away from the dozing grandsponsor.

"That baby may help her. And those other two as well," Robin said.

Tough decisions had to be made today. The law demanded it. Without their leaders, making a decision was usually frowned on. Goddess Amber's will would be done, once it was determined. If the grandsponsor could no longer hear her, someone in the mixed-up villa of villas should be able to hear and heed her voice.

"How can I know who to trust?" Tanna said.

"Do you trust anyone?" The grandmother asked.

Tanna trusted Robin, and the grandmother. Maybe Rusty, who was becoming more like a sister to her. "Very few, right now. I don't know who to trust. Which truth is the real truth?"

The grandmother touched Tanna's hand. The hand, which held hers, was tough and pliable as leather, shaking, yet with a firm grip. "Granddaughter, if you lose all trust in the people you know, he, and his followers, win!" The old woman pointed a crooked finger towards Orid.

Tanna glanced at him.

His face smirked. He couldn't talk, and maybe never would again after the throat injury and swelling. Even without a voice, he could do irreparable damage with his eyes and hands.

She shuddered. Tanna wouldn't let him win. Not now. Not ever.

"Come on Tanna, let's eat and talk." Robin reached for her hand.

She followed him to the small group gathered in one of the

lodges.

Tanna drank a gourd of warm water, and watched the other people.

The three Shims escapees, and the three Lava villa members sent to help them talked low in a corner.

Tanna didn't trust them now. Unlike before she left Lava with Zella. She had studied the tales. All the old problems were beyond the memories of living people. The fear of death and conflict lived on. The beginning of the end of the ancestors began ten gens ago. Fighting, battles, and further loss continued for at least five gens. Even the oldest alive, like the grandsponsor and grandmother here, had seen some of the later fighting between groups over the limited resources. At least once, all the adults from the villas had died in battles, leaving only gen four and gen one members to keep the villas alive.

As the villa numbers dwindled, they had learned to live within their resources. There had been hope that life would be better, and no memories of war would exist in a few more gens. No one wanted the grandsponsors to die. After their deaths, everyone alive would have known relative peace with the Goddess, and other people.

From a broken world, it had been a long, painful road to a steady daily life. Tanna wanted it to stay that way. She stepped up to the three from her villa. "Gel, Haro, Kleal why did you come? Why after the battle?"

Gel sat her gourd down. "We didn't intend to be late. We met a messenger from Orid to Blake. Wale, Ida, and Brix had fought with him. Blake will never know."

The return massagers wouldn't make it to Blake.

Zella wouldn't know the danger Tanna had been in.

"The sound of fighting reached us a march from here. Even though we ran, we reached the villa boundaries as Kol attacked Orid. Then, we waited, knowing it was over." Gel touched the rim of her gourd.

"I wish we had been here sooner. We stayed on the perimeter and made sure no roamer scouts escaped to warn Blake." Gel's eyes rimmed with tears as she looked up at Tanna.

The right course of action, if Gel was being honest. The grandsponsor's tales of battles fought, even from a gen who died before she was born, would strike fear into any heart. Her grandsponsor's parents had seen one of the last great battles. Surely the night before hadn't been any worse than the tales told

around the fire pits to scare the young from fighting amongst themselves.

"What do we all do now?" Robin said. "Obviously, the gardens have been abandoned to the wild animals this season. We will have few vegetables to see us through the winter."

"We can't all stay here. Most of those who stayed behind can't walk to summer camps. Grandsponsor there, he shouldn't be up at all." Gel looked at the old man and sighed. He was her mother's sponsor.

"We can't go back, and leave the weak, sick, and women behind," Kleal said.

One woman from the Almond villa spoke up. Tanna couldn't remember her name, only her face. "We could always multiply our garden here. We can grow enough for the winter here."

"Drea, can you?" Robin said. "You have enough seed?"

"I have two growing season's worth stored in an underground pit."

"Good, it will keep everyone busy and focused." As well as watching for more roamers. Tanna sat her gourd down.

"You have two days, Drea. We will all help you dig and plant. Hopefully, the seeds will be planted, and not growing if, and when, trouble comes here again." Hopefully, Zella would have fixed the mess at Klapit and be back by then with the full council.

"I have to trust each of you. Two days of hard work for us all. Then we will decide what to do. Drea show us your seeds and tools."

Grandmother smiled at her.

"What about Goddess Amber?" Someone asked.

"We have three days to hear from the council."

Three days to make a decision without angering Goddess Amber more than she already was.

# Chapter 14

The height of the Grass Sea lowered, down below their armpits. Zella pushed the grass out of the way, bending it down gently. No sense in wasting the food of the wild herds they depending on for food, clothing, and shelter. After they passed, it should spring right back up. The trail back would be difficult to follow. Naom could track it. As long as Blake didn't send any dogs after them, they'd be safe enough.

Calen huffed and struggled along behind them.

The sooner they discovered the new pit, and returned to Klapit to report to Blake, the better. She wanted to be at Klapit when, or if, Tanna and Robin returned. Who knew when that would be. Her spine tingled. Blake's unnoticed signs needed to be remembered and added to the tales.

The grass changed again to an even shorter type, prime habitat for wild horses.

Zella glanced back.

Dover followed her trail, leading Calen.

Calen's face was red. He panted, unable to breathe properly.

Dover's eyes begged her to stop.

Along the plain in front of her, there was a line of brush to the west, a sign of a small stream.

Dover caught up with her.

Sweat poured off Calen's face. His tunic was soaked through. He staggered to the ground. The fat around his arms continued moving, even though he had settled to the ground.

Horses galloped into view and raced for the tree line.

With that speed, long distances could be crossed swiftly. Even though the sun shone brightly, and sweat dripped off her brow, she froze with that thought. If she could think these thoughts, so could other people. If the Webbels had horses, they could cross vast distances quickly. Horses could explain some of the odd sightings at Klapit. With their strength, they could make the paths, and move the giant trees from other places to there.

Zella gasped. Goddess Amber would be angry. She had taken horses from their ancestors only a few gens before. Horses had been hurt and killed in the ancestor's wars. They had been weapons and tools. Even used as ways to prove wealth, and keep secrets, all things they should never do. It was okay to hunt a horse for food,



never for anything else.

Had this been what happened to Blake, and the Webbels? Had they ignored Goddess Amber's words?

Calen collapsed. His face was red, and his breathing ragged.

"Calen needs fresh water from that stream." Dover grabbed his water gourd and walked across the open grass. The horses moved back east, away from the brush. They watched him, and didn't graze, until Dover was in the brush.

Zella's legs spread wide, and with her hands on her hips.

Calen's head moved in circles.

Good, he is hallucinating in this heat. "Tell me about the horses."

Calen groaned.

"Do you have horses?"

A groan escaped, and Calen lifted his fat hand to his forehead.

"What do you have? How are you traveling so fast? Why?"

He passed out.

Dover would have to work to keep him alive.

Calen had once been special to her. A trusted friend, an artifact hunting partner, never a romantic partner. When Orid had been given to him, he joined Blake leading the Webbel villa as dig leader.

Orid hadn't boasted and bragged in camp. Where was he?

Shock and worry seized her.

Where was her daughter, her only child? Was Tanna safe from Blake and Orid?

Neither of the two captives in the dig lodge looked like him. Blake would never do that to Orid. They had always been too close.

Though Calen was his sponsor, according to Orid's mother.

Dover returned and gave the water gourd to Zella.

As she recovered, she tried to help Dover with Calen.

He couldn't walk the distance Blake expected them to travel, and they couldn't abandon him here. If Blake sent hunters, he would follow their trail. Or, the lions and tigers would. The Grass Sea was too big a place for only two people to travel alone because the grass covered their heads.

"Calen, you have to make it to that tree line. Get better please," Zella said. "Dover, what is the water like?"

"Drying up. There are a few good resting spots there. Help me lift him."

Calen groaned as they lifted and supported his unexpectedly overweight body between them. His head wavered from side to side. Lifeless feet dragged the ground behind them.

"Heat sick. Not good." Dover said. "He will have to rest in the shade. I have some herbs that will help."

"We haven't come far, only a little more than a march." Zella grunted and pulled his foot out of a ground cat hole.

They didn't try to speak as they helped their friend across the ground to the brushy riverbed.

Dover sat him down on the ground under the shade of brush trees. "Calen can't walk far because he hasn't in many seasons."

"He is always at the trades," Zella said.

"Perhaps. Quan has had his suspicions. We haven't had a chance to talk safely. Wait till Calen wakes. Trust me." He smiled at her.

So, even Dover and Quan were hiding something. She reached for his hand. If he hadn't said anything until now, that meant there was someone else he hadn't trusted. They had been alone the two nights, except for when Jorn had joined them. Perhaps it was Jorn he didn't trust. Her own brother had acted a little strange after Fall Trade. More watchful, and cautious.

Zella and Dover sat quietly by the trickling stream. It was enough to water the animals in this region on occasion. It wasn't enough to be dependable. She thought about the events of the last several days, and waited on Calen to wake up, if he did.

The wind shifted.

A new, dusky odor permeated the air.

Feet padded softly on the ground near them.

Twigs bent as branches snapped.

A lioness stalked through the brush.

Zella stifled a warning whistle.

Though the lioness glanced around, she seemed unaware of the three people. Behind her were two cubs, frolicking and playing as if they had nothing better to do. The lioness licked the cub's heads, and pushed them down gently with her paws. Then she took off into the grass, crouched low.

Zella clutched Dover's hand.

The lioness was hunting horses. She had left the cubs in the secluded brush, not even aware the humans could see them. Usually lionesses hunted in packs. There could be more nearby.

They couldn't drag Calen away without alerting the cubs. Nor would they leave him behind for the lioness to find on her return.

Branches crackled and small mammals fled as the lion cubs wrestled and played by the edge of the brush. Every now and then,

one would run a ways into the grass, chased by the second.

Spooked horses stampeded.

The top of the lioness's head was barely visible as she sprinted through the grass trying to catch the horse nearest the direction the people had come from.

The cubs took off running too, toward Zella and Dover. Large kittens, the cubs were strong enough to knock her down, if they tried.

Zella grabbed a stick beside her and held it up as the cubs crashed through the brush in front of her and almost into her lap. They snarled as they leaped backwards tumbling over each other, biting and racing away, back to a place beyond where their mother left them. Once they got there, they sat down and made mewing cries to alert their mother to danger.

"We have to go now," Dover said.

"How?" Zella asked.

Calen was passed out on the ground. He needed rest, and shade.

"We have to make a dragging stretcher. Quick, those two limbs look strong enough. We will have to tie him to them with his tunic," Dover said.

She grabbed the two long limbs. They felt weak and spongy to her. They couldn't wait to look for anything stronger.

With one side of Calen's tunic open, she gasped at the sight of his spongy body. The tunic had hidden his weight gain well. No one would ever have guessed.

Dover pushed the limbs through the neck. He stabbed them through the bottom of the tunic, tying each end onto the stick.

Zella glanced up to verify the location of the cubs.

Mewing cubs hadn't moved. One pawed at the other, and they soon lost interest in mewing.

The lioness could be coming back through the tall grass, dragging the horse, and they wouldn't see, or hear her.

At last, the stretcher was as complete as it could be in a hurry.

"Across the creek. We can cross back over here later," Dover said.

Zella grunted and took her side of the stretcher. They could make it easier to use later, if Calen survived and was unable to walk. They waded across the creek.

Calen's feet bumped into rocks, and bounced across the ground. He would be alive, even if his feet and legs were bruised tomorrow.

Almost out of sight of their hiding place, they heard a roar.

The lioness had found her cubs with Zella's scent on them. She shivered at the thought. The lioness would never forget her scent, and might track her down. At least she and Dover had spears, though where they could safely sleep tonight, out in the open, she didn't know.

She knew how she would feel if a strange creature touched her child. The mother lioness must feel the same way. A whole pack of lions might return and track them down.

Pulling the poles of the stretcher released some of the mental tension, while creating more physical tension. A hunter would be used to creating stretchers for meat and pulling it back to the villa, or trade meeting. Something she had never done, so her arms were not as strong as a hunters would be.

She and Dover pulled the stretcher as long as they could.

Panting she looked back the way they had come. No sign of the lioness, and no sounds of her following them. Surely, the lioness had smelled them, and even heard them.

Zella looked down at Calen. His face was pale, and red splotched. His eyes opened, and his breath was labored.

"Sorry," he whispered.

Dover reached for Zella's hand and they walked a short distance off. "Zella, I think Blake sent Calen out here with us to die."

"And we were supposed to go back, or go on?"

"Not sure. Going back would mean certain death. Who knows what waits for us where he is sending us, if the place exists," Robin said.

"Or if the people he sent to find us look in the same place we are going. We have to change direction."

Dover grinned. "We already did, of a sort. You led us off in the direction we were supposed to go. Then, we veered further west than he would have expected. We can't stay here. We have to keep going, somewhere."

"I wish we could find Tanna and Robin."

Dover took her hand. "I wish we could to. They are gen two adults. They have to fend for themselves. The Shims villa left several people behind. With the people Jorn sent, they will do their best."

"Horses, camels, sleds." Calen groaned. "Home, now."

Zella reached for him. "No, don't die. We need you."

"They will kill me if I don't die, or worse." Calen stared at her. His

eyes pulled back, far away into his head.

"Is he delirious?" Zella asked Dover.

Dover's hands rested gently on her shoulders. "Those men in the hut. The captives. What did they do?"

"Gifts," Calen whispered. "They brought gifts. Wind, and captive light."

"They will kill him if they know what he told us," Dover said. "Our lives could be in danger too. We have to hurry. A cow could help pull this stretcher, and we need help."

"You must tell me what you know," Zella said.

Dover touched her hand. "Calen will. Soon."

Zella didn't intercede with Goddess Amber often. Now she would.

She took Calen's hand and Dover's in her own. Three, joined together as best they could. "Goddess Amber," she whispered watching the clouds. "Wherever you are, please come to us. Once again, don't let the strong destroy the weak. Help us find peace."

Nothing seemed different.

Calen breathed raggedy, barely alive.

Dover stood behind her, supportive as always.

A tiny dot circled high, far away. As it came closer, it whirled and danced in the sky. It barreled down toward the ground. A precious bald eagle soared past them.

She drew in her breath as it pounced near her, and pulled a mouse from the grass.

The eagle watched her as the mouse squeaked in its sharp talons. It turned its head this way and that, and took off in a mostly northerly direction.

# Chapter 15

Tanna followed the others to the garden area. The stone trowel in her hand wasn't as good as a metal one. Those were nearly impossible to find. She and Zella needed new ones for their work in Klapit as well.

"Where the wall is low, open it so we can have a walkway to that glade," Drea said. "We never use that area. It sure is trying to grow trees though. Everyone has avoided it for some reason. The gen four grandmothers said it wasn't to be used while they lived."

That was unusual. Normally, any garden areas were kept clear and ready to plant. Almond's primary garden was well tended, and large enough to feed their villa, and half of another one. Their squash always grew the best. Their gourd collection was their main trade staple, along with their music.

Some gourd vines grew over the wall and into the forbidden area. Perhaps the gen four grandmother would tell her the forgotten tale of the past. Tales needed to be saved to protect the future.

Drea's instructions to others floated in a sea of sound. Adults would dig holes. First gen toddlers would follow behind, planting the seeds and covering the holes. Glenna and Yananda would bring water to those working, as well as carry water for the seeds and plants already growing.

An unusual kind of rock formed the waist high wall. It was different than any wall in the other villas. Though similar to the rock in the trade herd lodge.

Tanna searched for another smaller rock, so as not to mess up her only digging blade. One fit the palm of her hand perfectly. Two rocks were lower than the others were, with visible cracks. She grabbed a stick from nearby, set it across the lines, and pounded it.

The split spiraled like a spider web, increasing with each hit. A few taps at the next fault line, and they almost met. She stepped over the moss-covered wall and did the same on the other side. Back and forth she worked, until the rock was loose.

"Robin, come help me move these, so they don't break. We can put them back in the fall."

He wiped his brow and walked over to help her.

The ground under the bottom rocks was different. It didn't look like dirt. As soon as the stones were out of the way, she checked the ground. She rubbed the fine, loose soil, almost like the sand at

Footprint Lake. Her trowel dug the sandy dirt out. The tool vibrated when it hit something hard.

Tanna cleared a space as big as her knees.

Beside her, Robin pulled the dirt and sand out of the way, and kept it from falling back into the hole.

She cleared the top of what appeared to be a wooden board. The wood crumbled at her touch. An artifact of their ancestors. She had to save it and share it with Zella, who would pass it on to Jorn to determine how the council would decide its fate among the villas. Most likely, it would come back to Almond's dig leader, Marin, once Zella had determined its past, and created a new tale to recite around the trade fire pits.

Robin pointed at the crumbled wood bits.

An artifact had been hidden there, under the wooden board. She reached in and pulled out something the size of her palm. Gently, her fingers tapped the dirt off. Leaning over and holding it close to her mouth, she blew away the last bit of dust, and stared in wonder.

Tanna rocked to her feet.

Where she was, and what was going on around her, faded into the background.

In her hands was a figure of a horse with a person on its back. She had never seen a figure of a person on a horse. People caught and ate horses. They didn't ride them. Or, at least not in living memory. Someone had hidden this here, for good, or bad.

The horse's mane and the person's hair were amber colored. A tingle of electricity shot through her. The figure meant something important. She raced to the village tumbling over toddlers and garden plots.

In the sunshine outside a lodge, the gen four grandmother and grandsponsor rested.

"Grandmother, Grandsponsor, see what I found! Tell me the tale please!" Tanna fell at the feet of the grandmother and placed the figure in her lap.

The grandsponsor rolled over enough to peer into her lap at the figure.

The grandmother picked up the figure. "Young woman, where did you find this?"

"Buried in the rock wall around the garden. Drea said we have to move it, or at least make a walkway."

A chicken pecked at the ground beside the gen four grandmother.

Blood seeped from a wound on the grandsponsor's arm.

"This figure has a past. It is ancient they say, or so my mother told me. As her mother told her." The grandmother stared at the sky. Her eyes searched for something beyond what the people could see.

Tanna tried to wait patiently. She rested her hand on the woman's knee.

The grandmother looked down at her, tears in her eyes. She picked up the figure and turned it in the light.

"Once, long ago, battles were fought and won in machines that could go fast. Faster even than these magnificent creatures."

Even though the gen four grandmother sat in front of Tanna, the woman's mind raced among the dark clouds gathering overhead.

"No one remembers them. Even when I was born, only a few had seen such wonders. People used them for bad things." She looked into Tanna's eyes. "The Goddess felt more people died because of the machines than lived, so she took them away."

The grandmother's hands trembled. "We were left with horses and camels to travel fast. On horseback, a day's walk could be covered as quickly as a meal eaten."

She held the figure, rocking it as if it were running across her lap. "Then the battles on horseback and camels came. Not many people died, mostly the animals. Some villas had many more animals than people. More than all the people you have ever met. From far away, as well as near. While other villas had few animals, or none."

"As a young child, I remember." A faraway look continued in the grandmother's eyes.

She hugged the figure close to her. "This figure looks like my special horse. My sponsor wanted to send her to battle. And I hid this figure, to protect her. I wanted her back."

The grandmother's sad face peered down at Tanna. "My sponsor became angry when all the horses he sent died, or disappeared. He said it was my fault. For hiding the figure instead of displaying it, so it could see the sun and feel the wind."

She held the figure close against her chest. "By then, it was too late. Too many animals, and people, had died needlessly. So few were born the next season, we knew we could never replace our once vast herds. I turned the few we had left loose in the Grass Sea."

Chickens pecked closer, almost drowning out her voice.

Tanna strained to listen.



"My sponsor found out. He was furious. He gathered men, and rounded the horses up. They put them back into their fenced in horse lodge. It rotted long ago."

Robin touched Tanna's knee.

Her hands trembled as she recalled the scene. "During the night, a series of shrieks and screams echoed through the villa. No one dared go near the horse lodge. In the morning, all the horses were dead, hacked to bits." Her hands dropped to her lap.

Shaking hands handed the figure back to Tanna. "Keep this safe. The Goddess saw what we did, trying to control others with animals, and took them away. We could no longer surprise others on the backs of animals."

"Did any survive?" Robin leaned closer.

"Only those who my sponsor never found, perhaps." The grandmother grew quiet as she held back her tears.

"And Shims villa could no longer hurry to help the sick or dying either," Tanna said.

"Too many died of that sickness that almost took your mother's mother and did kill her sponsor. I feared it was my fault. I know now it wasn't. Goddess Amber found a way to save those who deserved to live."

"And some who didn't," the grandsponsor said.

"What about the baby camel? We left it with Erin. Can't we keep it? Are we breaking the Goddess's commands?"

The grandsponsor adjusted on the pallet. "Perhaps not. Have you heard the voice of Goddess Amber? She may feel your gen can learn to share them. Then again, maybe it is an opportunity to gain easy food, and learn to herd them like sheep and cows."

Tanna touched the statue. If Goddess Amber had spoken to her, she hadn't heard her voice, only the whisper of the Grass Sea blowing in a breeze caused by the horses running.

"Without more, there will never be a herd. You could learn to ride it. Look at the figure. It will be a few seasons before that baby could carry a person's weight. Maybe blankets now, nothing more." The grandmother sighed as she reached for the man beside her. "I wish your generation could begin again with horses. Maybe you need them, to fight Blake and Orid. I hope not."

"I hope not too." Tanna hid the horse figure in an interior pocket of her tunic. The one she usually kept for herbs found while exploring. She didn't want Orid, or his roamer scouts to see it. No telling what kind of luck that might bring.

"Do you need anything? I better go back to the garden."

"No dear Tanna. Thank you for coming."

As she turned to leave, the grandmother reached out. "And as much as the memories hurt, thank you for waking them up. Maybe they need to be re-lived." She turned to the man beside her, rubbing his arm.

Tanna's mind was a whirlwind of thoughts as she hurried back to the rock wall.

## Chapter 16

The eagle flew off into the distance.

Zella's arms ached from the weight of the stretcher and Calen.

"I guess that's the way to go," Dover said.

"I suppose."

It would be a long trip. Finding the forgotten pit mine they were looking for without any paths or marked places would mean they could pass right by it, and not even know it.

The Grass Sea stretched endlessly before them. What secrets it hid, Zella didn't know, nor did she want to. Goddess Amber had forbidden them to leave their community when the now gen four adults were children. This trip could be by her design, as the villas were too large now for the land to support, or merely Blake's way of removing them from what he was hiding in Klapit.

Grass birds, rather like wild chickens, scattered at their feet. Grasshoppers jumped away. A group of ground cats chattered at them, lifted their tails, and then ran when Zella waved her hand at them.

If the animals of the Grass Sea were acting this normal, Goddess Amber hadn't awakened the Mad Gods. Perhaps this search was what they were supposed to do for the good of the villas.

Another march, and they rested near the creek. On one side of the creek, the Grass Sea stretched beyond sight. In the direction they were going, only a thin line of grass melted into sand. Squirrels chattered in the brushy overgrowth. One dropped a nut at her feet.

She picked it up and held it in her hands. Different from the nuts in the glades between the villas. It could be safe to eat, or not. Even if an animal could eat it safely, people might not be able to.

Dover reached for the nut. "I wish we better understood what Calen was trying to tell us."

"Will he wake up?" She handed it to him.

"The pain medicine I gave him is strong."

"We have to keep dragging him then." Zella rubbed her sore arms. Lumps were forming, much like hunter's arm lumps. Learning how to hunt and bring back meat would be the next logical step. One she didn't want to do.

Dover took her hands. "We don't have one of the ancestor's tools, animal or mechanical, to move him. We have to keep going." He dropped the nut in his gatherboard and rubbed her arms.

She rubbed his arms. A little relaxation in the warmth of early spring. Winter would come again soon, and the bones of arms would feel like the icicles that occasionally formed on unheated lodge ceilings. A drowsiness overtook her as her achy muscles relaxed.

A midafternoon sun beat down on the sand that stretched beyond a thin line of short grass. Pools of water appeared, and disappeared, across the desert in front of them. They planned to wait till the sun sank lower to cross it.

The desert clouded over.

Images appeared in the sand, fast approaching. Objects she didn't recognize, and couldn't put a name to. Moving shapes, larger than animals, though not alive, moved on the landscape in front of her. Strange loud booms like thunder. Voices spoke, and screamed in languages she didn't understand.

Zella sensed movement and motion as her mind travelled through this seeming maze of the unimaginable. She viewed it much as a watcher viewed a runner running away from the villa. They wore strange clothes, material like nothing she had ever seen. People sprawled on the ground at odd angles. Blood covered their bodies, and pooled on the sand around them.

Dover shook her shoulder.

She moaned as she pulled out of the dream. At first, she was unable to move, and gasped for breath. Her body felt icy even with the warm sunshine touching it.

He smiled and pulled her close. "What did you see?"

"Destruction. It reminds me of the gen four battle tales. It may be a bad dream, or a vision from the Goddess Amber. I'm not sure if it's a memory of the past, or vision of the future. I don't know any tales of strangers living within a day's walk of our villas."

"I don't either," Dover said. "Tell me what you saw."

Zella sat up and touched her gatherboard. The touch of something familiar was comforting.

"I want to know what you saw." Dover picked up more nuts and placed them in his gatherboard.

Zella described the dream. Even now, she felt the chill of the screams. Puddled blood shimmered and flowed. There was something else about the dream. There had been machines that moved. One had sent fire flying at the people on the ground. No wonder Goddess Amber had taken them away.

"How is Calen doing?"

Dover glanced in the direction of the stretcher. "He seems some

better. He woke up."

Zella wondered why her vision bothered her so much. Something about it had to hold an answer. The sun was round. If only, they had something that round, they could find a way to push Calen along.

The thought sent shivers down her back. Goddess Amber had banned machines for the reason she had seen in the desert before her. People had used them to kill others, without reason, or knowing who they killed. Only a few crimes were worthy of death in Goddess Amber's way of living. Men who raped women, and their sponsored children, were almost the only people who were ever killed in the villas.

Dover held her close. He murmured, trying to calm her.

If the Goddess had sent her the dream, maybe she was supposed to use it. Maybe there was something here in the sand they could use, even if only temporarily. Empty desert extended on all sides, and in the direction they were supposed to go.

"Leave Calen here in the shade. My vision was trying to tell me something." Zella pulled away from his embrace.

"What are we looking for? We can't wander far."

She scrambled to her feet. "I'm not sure. I'll know it when I see it. Let's go."

Calen appeared okay, breathing easier.

Straight lines crossed the sandy soil. Oddly straight, with dark coloration in the ridges. Following the lines, she noticed the ground wasn't as level as it appeared. There were craters all around. With little circles on the ground, as if someone had thrown small rocks up and tossed them everywhere.

The set of tracks ended at one of these craters. Something about it was unnerving. Pieces of something stuck out of the sand.

She bent down to dig carefully with her hands. At first, all the sand slid back in the hole. Her fingers felt something deep down, in the sand.

A gentle touch revealed an oddly familiar texture, that wasn't sharp. Tugging gently, she sat back on her heels. The item broke loose. She almost screamed when she recognized what she had pulled out of the sand. The bones of a human hand.

Dover sat beside her.

She turned to him.

"Keep digging. I'll try over here."

Zella reburied the hand bones, and moved over to try again. A piece of something else peeked through the surface. Her hands

pulled the sand away. It was thick. As thick as her wrist was wide. It wouldn't come out with a gentle tug.

Dover helped her pull the sand away.

The artifact broke free of the swirling hot sand. A disk shape, as long as her elbow to her little finger. It had a hole in the middle, and four large holes around it, with a branch like framework holding it together. Little scraps of other artifacts had been attached across one side. She pulled and pushed on it. It felt sturdy enough.

"Dare we break the prohibition?"

"The dream, it gave you this?"

Zella held the item in her lap. "It's similar to what the machine moved on. It looks like the sun, with a hole cut out for the moon. All those people who died here, this place is haunted by their ghosts. I don't want to disturb their burial, like I did that hand."

"We can take it to push Calen along. We are being given a gift. We may never use it again, or we may. Leave that to the Goddess to decide."

"I wish we didn't have to. The damage done by these, and other things, was so great." Zella sighed.

"We have no idea what the Webbels have. We have to take what we are given to help ourselves, so they don't make the same mistakes our ancestors did."

Somehow, this round object was supposed to hold Calen's weight.

Perhaps they needed something else? Nothing in sight grabbed her attention. They hurried back to Calen.

His hiding spot in the brush was undisturbed by scouts or wild animals.

# Chapter 17

Tanna kept the horse and rider figure hid from Orid and the roamers while she worked. No one who knew about it spoke of it. She and Robin glanced at each other and smiled while planting.

Gel and Brix had left soon after dawn to run to Klapit and back. The day passed quickly. There had been no word from Jorn, or any of the other leaders.

Before long the regular garden area, and former horse lodge, would be planted. Tanna dug the last hole.

Robin helped her up.

Rusty had almost caught up with the planting.

Brix and Gel returned at the evening meal.

Gel swallowed the last drops in her water gourd as the sun's rays swept across the lodges. "No sign of any of the people of the villas in the pits. Vultures squawked, circled, and dived at the bison meat. We didn't even see or hear any dogs."

Brix dropped his huntboard. "It was eerie. A cloudless shadow stretched across the land."

"It was bustling when we left yesterday. Blake had requested the main villas to hunt for more bison. They left soon after we did. The pit miners should have remained. No sign of Zella, Dover, Varl, Vira, or even Calen." Gel glanced back toward the path to Klapit.

Gel's tale was disturbing. Zella wouldn't go with the hunters by choice. Without the council leaders, someone here had to make the decision. Orid and the roamers must be dealt with quickly, according to tradition. More than three days, and they had to be turned loose. They'd already spent one day.

Orid and his followers didn't throw mud in the water, or hide a new mother's baby blankets. These men had hurt people, and intended to kill them. No signs of remorse once they were caught either. Their crime against the villas was so great, no one here wanted to be responsible for the punishment of these men. This wasn't a dig leader's choice. Or, even a villa leader's decision. Only the whole council should have the right to decide what to do with Orid and the roamer scouts. Except that neither the whole council, a villa leader, nor, even a dig leader where anywhere to be found. Only two apprentice dig leaders, the elderly, new mothers, and the young of four of the five villas.

A decision about the men would occur after the evening meal of

leftover vegetables and rabbit stew. The normally tasty meal was coarse as sand in Tanna's mouth.

Someone had to begin the meeting. It had to be her, or Robin. Technically, they were the highest-ranking members available, even if many other villa members were older.

She glanced over at one of the young men feeding Orid. His throat was so badly tore up, that he might not live. All he could swallow was soup, not enough to build his strength. Maybe the wounds would fester and Goddess Amber would solve the problem for them. Life would be easier to wait, and let nature takes its course.

Robin touched her arm.

With his help, and a few other healers from Shims, that would not happen.

Grandmother sat beside Grandsponsor to help him eat the stew and soft vegetables. As the small children scrambled up from the meal, she motioned them back down. "Tanna, you and Robin should decide soon. What will you do?"

Tanna's voice trembled as she spoke. "Grandmother, I know my rank is higher than yours. I would give it up. To let you, with your knowledge, decide. I don't feel comfortable with these decisions."

Grandmother wiped her chin. "Would you give it up for life? What about the child yonder?" She nodded toward the boy that Uden held.

If Tanna adopted the child, and Rusty as her sister, they would gain Tanna's status. Tanna was used to her own plans, not what others told her to do. She knew the leader ways. If she gave them up now, and tried to lead later, the villa might not trust her.

Robin placed his hand on hers. "Your mom, and my sponsor, wouldn't want us to give up our future, not for this."

Tanna's face warmed as everyone watched her. "I don't want to make life and death decisions. This is no small crime. It's not even against one person, it's against everyone."

Grandmother smiled. "That is why you are the one to make it. You don't want to. It is occurring at Klapit. Imagine what your mother must be going through. What she is trying to find and fix."

Zella wouldn't like it any more than Tanna did. Her mom wouldn't avoid her duty.

"Tanna, don't make the ancestor's mistake. We already ignored the little warnings. They've built up. Don't let it go on. Do you want these men to be turned loose? Would you ever feel safe again?" Gel asked her.



Gel was right.

Robin, as a man, and a member of the Shims couldn't lead in this decision.

"I will if you want me to," he whispered.

Tanna gulped. She knew in her heart she had to lead. That was what Zella wanted her to do. Someday. Next trade maybe, not now. Not like this.

Orid smirked.

Apparently, he thought she didn't have the backbone to protect herself, and the rest of the villas. If he ever recovered, he would destroy her, like in the tales told around the fires.

"I will lead. I expect every member here to participate, even the small children." She glanced around the group huddled around the fire. "First, let us hear the men's reasons for what they did."

One of the scouts had seemed somewhat remorseful. Maybe begin with him. She picked up a stick and pointed to him. "State your name, and the crimes you are accused of."

The man gulped. He couldn't escape with tied feet.

Children stared at him.

Infants babbled.

He lowered his head and whispered. "No, please. Not in front of the children."

"You must. All here have witnessed your crimes and must be responsible for deciding your fate, with the help of the Goddess of course." Tanna's voice echoed off the villa walls.

The man looked down at his plate, as if he wished he could crawl into the piece of wood and hide.

"I am Orid's cousin, Fendon. I joined the group of men. We were not men then. The bad things I thought were silly, childish almost. I never thought they would keep them up. They are worse now. I guess I thought they would outgrow bad behavior."

He leaned forward and glanced at several people, the young crippled boy in particular. "I am sorry. I never meant to hurt anyone. My life isn't worth this. No one's life is."

The boy spoke up. "He never treated me bad. He almost dropped me once. I think it was an accident. The others wanted to leave me to die."

"Did you harm any of the young women, or any other people?"

"I never harmed anyone. I saw them harm people. I was even there when they stampeded the bison. That seemed like fun. I wish I hadn't now," he said.

Grandmother grunted.

Grandsponsor glanced at the young man.

"I think stampeding the bison wasn't so bad." It may have saved us all. "Does anyone here have anything to add to this man's statement?"

No one said anything.

The formal words Jorn had used to declare one of the young hunters guilty of setting a lodge on fire the previous winter, would work well. Tanna looked at each face carefully to see if any were hiding opinions.

They all seemed content so far. "This man, Fendon, must pay for his association with these men. Do the people believe this man attempted to harm them?" If she didn't do the formality correctly, no one was commenting in front of Orid.

No one spoke or raised an arm.

"Do the people believe this man may have prevented injury, or death?"

The injured boy raised his arm, as did a few others.

Fendon may have been led to this group to keep their damage to a minimum.

Goddess Amber watched over them in every way she could. What should she do?

"Fendon, you owe an obligation. You will stay here, under the watchful eye of the grandmother and the grandsponsor. You will be expected to help them, and the boy, with their daily needs. At night, your feet will remain tied. During the day, you must be free to assist. If you ever leave before your obligation is paid, may the Goddess find you first."

Fendon waited with his eyes closed. "How long is my obligation?"

Good question. "Until peace returns. Or the villas return and say your obligation is complete. Do any people protest this punishment?"

No one spoke up.

Orid smirked. He would try to show his innocence.

Tanna believed Fendon. Neither she, nor anyone else, would ever believe Orid. Eight more men to question before she reached him. She took a deep breath.

"You next." She pointed to the man beside Fendon.

He sneered. "Do you believe him? Fendon isn't his name. And I never did a thing."

"You lie!" Screamed one of the young women as she stood up. "You had your friend hold me down so you could hurt me."

Several other voices joined in, full of anger at the man. People jumped up and grabbing drumsticks.

"Enough!" Tanna tapped her stick on a drum.

"What is your name?"

"Does it matter? You've already decided my guilt, haven't you?"

The man tried to lunge at her.

Gel and Brix grabbed the ropes tied around his legs, and pulled him back to a seated position.

"I think we can all hear his guilt. Does anyone declare him guiltless of attacks against women and children?"

No one spoke up, or said anything.

"Did anyone not see something this man has done?" She pointed the stick at each person as she looked them in the eye.

"I've only seen his sneer, and that is usually an indication of guilt." Robin looked at the ground.

Tanna sat back down. What could she do with him? What would the Goddess want? His crimes mounted against him. She had no memory of anyone with this many crimes. Could the ultimate price be expected? The grandmother would know.

The older woman's eyes were wet with tears. She knew this young man. He wasn't much older than Tanna herself.

"He is guilty." He had to die for his crimes. How, she had not decided. Maybe she could wait until all the men were tested. I'm not a killer. None of us are. In fact, Gel, Haro, and Kleal from Lava, and Wale, Ida, and Brix from Shims were the only ones in Almond who could hunt, or kill, besides Orid and his roamer scouts.

Robin had to fight to save lives, not take them. He could never be a full leader because of that.

She needed his strength now, to help her through this. He might no longer care for her, because she had to do what was best for the people. A tear slipped down her cheek. Once begun, the meeting had to continue.

The outbursts of each man were similar. Many she had never seen before, not even at a trade meeting. All of these men had caused serious damage, and potentially death. If they had caused one of these women to become pregnant against their will, that child would have to die at birth. It was the law. No one could raise a rattler child. It harmed the mother, the child, and those around them far too much.

Tanna watched the group carefully as she went along. As she reached Orid, last and leader, tears appeared in Uden's eyes.

"Orid, are you the leader of these roamers?"

"Never," he croaked.

"The Goddess will punish those who lie."

He looked away.

"He can talk," Robin said. "Though I wouldn't recommend it for long."

Orid refused to look at her, or any other person.

Tanna spoke to the group. "Is there anyone here who finds Orid innocent?"

No sound. Not even an infant's cries.

With luck, memory of Jorn's formal words would not fail her now. "All people here, and Goddess Amber, find Orid guilty of the most unspeakable crimes. Holding people captive and treating them as objects. Forcing people to do things they otherwise would not do. Of rape and attempted murder, among other unknown and unspeakable crimes. A punishment must now be set for these men."

"And how are you not holding people against their will?" One of the convicted asked.

Tanna knew this question would come up. As it should. She smiled.

The man grinned. He thought he had caught her breaking the laws. Almost. They had almost let this meeting wait longer than the law allowed. "We do have the right to hold you captive. You have harmed all of us, not only one of us. We must hold you to protect people, and you yourself, from your evil."

The grandmother spoke up. "Once, our ancestors believed that everyone could recover and no longer hurt people. We have tried to learn from them. Some recover, if they have caused minor hurts to themselves, or others. Those who have caused major hurts rarely change. We cannot take the chance. Peace is too valuable. Without peace, we all die."

Orid tried to laugh. "Old woman, we are the peace keepers. Do what we say, and have all the peace you want."

The gen four grandmother smiled. "Orid, you do not know what peace is. Your spirit was damaged. Perhaps there were people a gen or two back who didn't do what they should have. People felt sorry for them."

The old woman looked directly at Uden.

Uden hugged her baby to her.

"Orid is a rattler, much as Blake is. Both mothers begged for them to be allowed to live as infants. Then, as each child grew to appear more like the roamer who attacked them, both mothers grew to despise the child they kept, and push them further away. Everyone knew Blake was, and ignored him. No one wanted either boy. Both grew into strong men, full of anger, fear of abandonment, lacking self-respect, and self-care."

"Some can succeed," Uden spoke softly. "Please."

"Child, please give her up. Send her to a villa no one knows. Orid is her sponsor, isn't he?" The Grandmother leaned toward her.

Uden looked at the ground.

"With his blood, the child will be like that someday. Do you want to be in my place one day?"

"Orid isn't your child," Uden said.

"No. And neither is Blake. However, another who they may trust is. While that child was not as a child begun by these men, he wasn't a child I would now choose to have. Thankfully, his sponsor died in a hunting accident, while that son was quite young."

Who did she mean?

"I chose to do the next best thing, and adopted him out. I am not even sure he knows he was adopted. We will see."

"Wouldn't not telling him be a lie?" Tanna asked.

"I see that now. I knew the ancestors asked us to never adopt a child and not tell them. I didn't want to see that baby die. And I didn't want him to know why I didn't want him. I thought I could watch him grow up, and all would be fine." Her eyes brimmed with tears.

"We can't change the past," Fendon said. "Even I can't change mine. And I would. What are you going to have me do to my former friends, that I now wish I had abandoned?"

Of course. She could require Fendon to kill them.

If he learned to kill his friends. She shivered at the thought.

Rusty reached over and grabbed her sleeve. "Mushrooms. I have some."

That was a good answer. No violence. Too bad they couldn't trust the men to dig their own graves. Goddess Amber must be appeased.

"Do you have enough?"

Rusty nodded.

Tanna handed them to Robin. "Robin, will these work?"

"Yes. How will you give them to the men?"

Robin was right. The men would refuse to eat them. And even is

she did, or could, would she want herself, or others, to know how to prepare such a mixture?

The sun was sinking on the horizon.

Orid and his men laughed and sneered. They knew she wasn't able to kill them. She would have to let them go.

Tanna bent forward as the grandmother moved her lips. The statue inside her tunic pressed against her chest.

She had an idea. Only the Goddess could answer her prayers now.

## Chapter 18

Short grass gradually reclaimed the desert. The ends of Calen's stretcher fitted well into the larger holes of the disk. It slid easily across the sand, leaving an odd track behind them. Once they reached an area where actual soil covered the sand, the disk under the stretcher grabbed at the clumps of grass. Reaching the grass meant they could hide their tracks from any scouts Blake might have sent to follow them.

Zella was ready to rest. They stopped to stretch their arms and release the strain. No one knew where they were going.

Another march and they reached a tangled undergrowth next to a small stream.

"Cross and then camp." Zella said.

"We can drag the stretcher through the middle for a ways so it will be more difficult to track us." Dover pushed back into the undergrowth and pulled branches down to hide their tracks.

She uncovered Calen's face.

He smiled at her, barely moving. The leaf mat protected his face from sunburn, and let him sleep while they walked. Recovering from overheating could take many days. Days they didn't have.

Dover attached a branch to the rear of the stretcher.

She picked up her side of the stretcher, and walked toward the creek. It might not float if the water were deep, and she didn't have a plan for that.

Zella splashed a little as she crossed the creek. It wasn't much of one. Before the other bank, she and Dover turned north and followed it the length of two lodges before choosing a place to climb out of the water.

The stretcher caught on a clump of grass.

Calen moaned and his head rolled.

A nearby clump of trees would be a good spot to leave him to rest while they checked the location. No sign of ants, or rodent holes nearby. They might not be anywhere near the pit they were looking for. Regardless, her arms could pull the stretcher no further tonight. As she sat it down, her muscles leaped and jerked in protest.

Somewhere out west Vira, Varl, Sharel, and Nala were looking for a pit to mine as well. If both groups found one, which one would the community move to?

Leaves from the brush would keep the evening sun out of

Calen's eyes. He blinked at her.

Her gatherboard had slipped as she sat the stretcher down. She pulled it back onto her shoulder. "Dover and I will walk a little ways. Not far, we want to check beyond the brush."

He grimaced. The stretcher poles, against his bare skin, had to be rubbing him raw. There was nothing else they could do.

She turned and pushed her way through the brush.

After breaking their way through tangled vegetation that no humans had stumbled through, they reached trees and flowers in a small glade. She tripped over something not quite visible in the dirt. It looked like sand. Her foot had struck it hard, and the sand hadn't shifted. She rubbed it with her hand. Yes, it felt like sand. Like dried wet sand.

"Dover, look at this."

He stumbled over, looked at it, and felt it. "Something the ancestors made. Not sure how they made that."

"Let's keep exploring. Look there is more over there!"

She tripped over more of the sand rock. Blood trickled from her knee. Whatever it was, it had fallen long ago, and it had sharp edges that could cut.

"Wait," Dover said. "Let's see if Calen can walk this far. It's shady, and it might be good for him."

"Okay." Trudging back through the tangled growth, they broke more branches.

Moving Calen was difficult. He was able to walk a little distance, holding on to both of them. About half-way through the tangled mess, his feet began to drag and they pulled and pushed him along. They left him near the first stone they had seen.

"You'll be okay?" She asked him.

"Water."

With her help, he drank from his water gourd.

Dover pushed back through the underbrush with Calen's huntboard. "I tried to make it look natural back there. We'll be safer away from the stream."

They made Calen as comfortable as they could. Not that there was any comfort here without a lodge and a fire.

"I'm going down the stream to search for rabbit or nutria." Dover nodded to her as he picked up his gatherboard.

She waved to him, and then crept through the undergrowth. A small area between those unusual sand rocks looked perfect for digging. Zella cut through some growth, and set it aside for a fire.



later.

A long sand rock tilted under the thin layer of soil. As she moved left to right, back and forth, it wouldn't move. At least they would have a dry place to build a fire to cook.

Zella moved further down the glade. Bits of sand rock stuck up at odd angles. She tried to dig between them. The top layer of brush had been cleared from a sleeping area sized part of the glade when Dover returned.

"Here's dinner. I'll cook. Have you found anything?"

"A good place to cook over there." Zella pointed to the cleared space by their gatherboards. "I'll look for greens we can eat."

"Do you think we will find anything here?" Dover sat the rabbits down on the rock and walked to where she was. His hair was framed by the late evening sun.

"Not sure. Maybe this was an old building. We have to try." Her foot slid on a moss-covered rock.

"Let's clean up after dinner. Don't dig too long."

Zella watched him walk back to skin the rabbits. He was as perfect a man as she could ever have dreamed of. The hurt from when her son died, the one she knew he sponsored, welled up stronger than ever.

She bent back over and pushed her trowel into the loose earth. It hit something spongy. The sponginess was familiar, so she didn't push the trowel harder. Excited, and shaking, she quickly loosened the soil for a hand width around the spot. Then she dug as quickly as she could, trying to feel for the edges of the item.

The top was dirt encased. A little longer and wider than her hand. Short, it was not a finger's length deep. She slowly pulled it out of the ground. She tried to determine what was dirt, and what wasn't.

"What is it?" Dover sat beside her.

"Could it be?" Zella whispered. She put her fingers to the right side and let the bottom fall. The top stayed in her left hand attached, as the right side fell a few hand widths. She took a deep breath and stared upwards into Dover's eyes.

"It survived so well for so long."

"Maybe they don't have much rain here. Those sand rocks sheltered it. Maybe they sheltered it more before they fell," he said.

"If it was a building, and only fell a gen ago, that might be so." She placed the item in her lap, and opened it again. Written items were rare. Most had long rotted away, before even the

grandmothers of her own gen were grown. Children learned to write a few words in the sandy beaches during the summer, as a game. Written pottery could be found in the pit mines.

Zella carefully turned the leaf to a water damaged picture of a plant. Letters covered part of it, making it difficult to see what the plant was. Perhaps the purpose had once been to explain what plants to use for medical reasons, or food. She turned a few more pages and saw animals. Several she recognized, and several she didn't. Water and bugs had damaged many pages beyond recognition.

Several pages of people, in different clothes than she had ever seen appeared. She wondered how there could ever have been so many different people. Could they have had so many different shades of skin and hair? How were all those different clothes made? Some were so bundled up; they would boil alive during the summer if they dressed that way.

She handed the picture book to Dover. "No idea. Let's keep it and preserve it. Maybe someday we will know what the ancestors were trying to tell us."

"Do you think they saved more here?"

Zella sighed. "If they are all damaged, or pictures only, they won't be helpful to daily living. It would be fun to dig them out and look at them. There is a lot of this sand rock around to protect these artifacts."

"The rabbits are ready to cook," Dover said. "We need to talk to Calen about what to do next."

Dover hid the artifact back under the sandy rock where she had found it. It was safer there for now, anyway.

Zella followed Dover to help bring Calen to the sand rock to prepare their meager meal.

She picked a few leaves and hoped they found more to eat. There hadn't been much food to bring in their gatherboards.

# Chapter 19

"The Goddess will decide if any of the rest of you are innocent, as you so proclaim," Tanna said directly to Orid.

Orid wouldn't expect her to remember the vagaries of the law. "You have to release us. You've had your chance."

She smiled. He was trying to escape to attack them again. "No. We have two more days."

The horse figure pressed against her chest as she leaned forward.

"One day is given when waiting on the leaders to return, and when waiting on the Goddess to decide."

Tanna signaled Gel, Haro, and Kleal from Lava, and Wale, Ida, and Brix from Shims. "You six will go now, and look for a herd of horses. Take most of the dogs with you. When you find the horses, return to let us know the path the men must take. The dogs will stampede the horses. The Goddess will save any who are truly innocent."

"Fendon, you will bear witness to the fact that your former friends will be tried beyond our fire. As the animals stampeded, no one will be expected to watch. It is not our decision to make."

The six hunters grabbed their weapons, called their dogs, and strode off into the distance. She waved Logan and Kol to follow them. It would be a long night. They had to wait until the Goddess was ready to determine the fate of these men.

Later, in the treasury, Tanna cuddled up to Robin. "I hope you understand. It has to be done."

He reached across her. "Yes it does. My villa can't make death decisions. We can only save lives. That is why we are both the highest, and lowest, rank. Enough isn't enough. Shims know too many ways to abuse the gift of life given to us."

"You didn't say anything when I decided what to do." Tanna rolled back into his chest.

"Of course not." Robin chuckled. "I know what Orid and his roamer scouts are like. You are letting the Goddess decide anyway."

Tanna drifted, almost asleep, and remembered something. "What about Uden? Grandmother said bad things happen when rattlers live."

Robin grunted. "Right now she wants Corandra. It's too late to let the baby die the way it should have. And if we force her, Rusty's

baby brother may die too."

"Grandmother said Blake was wanted as an infant too. Then, later his mother changed her mind."

"We need to be sure Orid cannot hurt anyone else. After that, we have to find Zella, and Dover."

Tanna snuggled closer to Robin. "What would happen if you went against your villa teachings?"

His body stiffened against hers. "You mean if I killed someone? Or let them die? I don't know. Most who have tried to kill someone, or ended up in that position, have died soon thereafter. Even mothers in our villa who have to allow infants to die rarely live much longer than the baby does. After an attack, they will take poison early in pregnancy. That way they don't have to see, or kill, the infant."

"Is that what you gave her?"

"She knew what it was, and what it does."

"Did you give that to me last fall?"

"I felt it was best. I didn't want you hurt."

"I don't want you to die. Will the Shims villa members be in danger with this solution?"

He held her close. "I don't think so. They only are helping drive the horses. They are hunters."

Robin paused before he continued. "If these deaths will prevent many more, of all their friends and family, most will recognize their part in saving lives, not ending them. They understand. One glance at that barely gen two woman those scouts raped, and they accepted what has to happen."

His hands touched her side gently, not pressing for anything. With their bodies pressed close she drifted into sleep.

Tanna skimmed above the grasses on the plain. Leading her villa to a new place. The person riding beside her poked her in the foot with a stick.

The rider didn't have a stick.

Her foot was poked again.

Her eyes opened.

Gel stood over Tanna with her spear in hand.

Tanna cringed and covered her face with her arms.

"Sorry it's so early. A horse herd has been sighted. The hunters and dogs will herd it this way shortly after dawn. We need to move Orid and the roamers out to where they will run."

Tanna yawned and stretched. "Guess I need to wake up the rest

of the villa. We will need all of their help. The roamer scouts have to be moved safely. They can't have their hands or feet free."

"We can put four together and tie the legs of one to the other in a line. They can stumble along like that to where we need them to go. The men can't escape before spears catch them," Gel said.

Tanna shuddered at the thought of having to throw a spear at a person. The threat of a spear would scare these men, who obviously weren't afraid to spear a person.

Gel hurried out of the treasury, not completely closing the windsun.

Robin reached over and touched her shoulder. "How do you feel about this whole thing?"

Tanna rolled over and tears slipped onto his shoulder.

Those roamers must never see her cry, or red eyed. "I don't like it. I don't want them to hurt anyone else, or me again. I can't stand the thought of having to make the final decision. I am glad we are leaving it up to the Goddess in a way that shows we are trying to do what is right. We have to hurry."

He rubbed her shoulder. "It won't be an easy day for anyone. Wake the others gently."

"What about Uden? I don't feel I can make that decision as long as Jorn and Zella are alive."

"We don't know if they are," Robin said.

Tanna wiped away a hot tear. "They have to be. We need the council."

"We can leave that up to the Goddess as well, for now." Robin pulled himself up, and rolled up his sleeping mat.

During the night, the roamers had been tied to trees nearby. Bugs and ants had crawled on them and bit them.

Robin checked each complaint out. "Yes, you all have ant bites, and a spider bite or two. Compared to your crimes, those are nothing. You can all walk."

"How can I walk from where that spider bit me? My legs will rub that bite constantly." One of the roamers grumbled and tried to adjust his weight off the spider bite with his tied hands.

"Scratching will relieve the pain of the bite," Robin said.

"If I scratch, it will irritate it more, and make it crack open and bleed. I won't be able to walk by tomorrow."

"We will worry about tomorrow, if you are alive."

Robin turned his head to hide a smile. "At least one of them will die by spider bite if nothing else," he whispered.

If only there were another way. These roamers would kill her and everyone in all four villas if they ever escaped and she knew it. As she tied the men's legs together, she listened to them talk.

They bragged about what they had done to the women and children. One even said that Rusty was too old to be any fun anymore.

Tanna shuddered. Her resolve hardened, though she did not relish the scene she was about to create.

Gel and Robin helped the men stand.

Fendon and Robin would carry Orid.

Gel would help her to lead the grandsponsor to the plains. He wanted to see the Goddess's decision. He was too weak to walk there himself.

Representatives of the villas walked with them. One new mother, and most of the infants, stayed behind.

Uden carried Corandra. She hadn't left her baby alone since last night.

"Here." Gel pointed to an open spot where the grass had been eaten down by herds.

The place was beyond sight of Almond villa. With the stumbling roamers, and four people carrying two men, it took at least twice as long as the normal half march from the villa walls.

Gel helped her set the gen four grandsponsor down near some brush, and the gen four grandmother sat beside him.

Orid and his roamers were led further into the field. Fendon and Robin put Orid on the ground and left him there. Then they made the other men lay down, four on each side of him.

They taunted Tanna.

"You won't do it."

"I don't see any horses."

"You can't leave us here to be eaten by fiery ants."

"We'll escape, and you'll be first!"

Fendon stood beside her. He walked forward, halfway between her and the men on the ground.

Grasses waved in the distance. The ground rumbled.

The horse herd thundered through the brush, and down the hill.

She stood between the villas and the men, outside of the runway for the horses. Her spear held high and waved in the breeze. None of the scouts could escape. The horse figure pressed against her not so flat chest.

The rest of the people turned back, unable to watch. They would

peek back.

Tanna must appear to be watching, as they would expect.

The men screamed in terror, and tried to escape as the herd flowed across the plain.

Most horses shied away from people. These would have dogs on both sides and behind.

No escape.

## Chapter 20

Zella dished out the rabbit stew. Not as good as day long simmered nutria stew smothered in herbs and greens. It would do for tonight.

She handed a gourd full to Calen.

It wouldn't do any good to start the conversation too soon. Best to eat and nourish the body and mind. Memories of Tanna and trips to recover hidden herb gardens fluttered about as she ate. Her daughter knew the healthy herbs. Robin knew the healthy and dangerous ones. Uden was the unknown. Even though she had willingly gone back with them, that was almost unnatural for a woman to choose to travel alone. Particularly one who wasn't a dig leader or runner.

"We didn't tell them which villa to go to," Zella said.

"Robin will stay with them."

"I don't want to look for the missing pit mine. Alone, we may never find it. We can't dig and hunt. Let's go back to Klapit and say we didn't find it." At least then, they could drop off Calen, and search for Tanna and Robin at the other villas.

Calen's brow furrowed as he ate. "I have no idea where to go next."

"Do you think we should go further and search more, or turn back?" Dover said.

"Neither seems right." Calen leaned against the tree behind him.

No, it didn't. Finding Tanna was all that seemed right. How had her own mother ever abandoned her and Jorn? Thinking of Tanna alone without the protection of her villa was more than Zella could stand.

"I'm not sure we can, or should, go back," Calen said.

If Calen was afraid, there really was something to fear.

Zella pulled rabbit meat off a leg bone. "What do you know about Webbel that you can tell us?"

His hands trembled and fell to his lap. "Not good things, that's for sure. I don't know much. I think Blake didn't trust me since." Calen's words drifted and his eyes closed.

"Since what Calen?" The rabbit bones rattled in her lap.

He sat back. "Since I asked him why he treated that woman so bad. Why he let the roamers attack her."

"What woman?" An icy chill gripped her heart. Women were



valued leaders; and would never allow a man to hurt them.

"She was a woman of high standing in her villa, far away. Blake brought them to Webbel."

"What?" Dover leaned forward. "Why did no one tell us?"

"I'm sorry. Blake watched me like a hawk, and I never had a chance to share the knowledge. He didn't want anyone to know. I thought everyone knew, and didn't speak of them. He said he brought them to help all of us." Calen threw a chunk of gristly rabbit meat. It bounced off a tree.

"Secrets would wake Goddess Amber even more than being overcrowded." Zella shook her head.

A mouse skittered across the far end of the clearing chased by a small fox.

"I know. The woman chose a man of high standing from another villa, Mills, that found Blake to trade with. I think she died." He lowered his eyes. Two tears fell into his hands clasping the rabbit chunks.

He threw the pieces of meat. "I think she died. She was so pretty. What did the roamers do to her children? I haven't seen them for days." Calen held his hands to his eyes and cried.

"What children?" Dover reached over to comfort the crying man.

In between sobs, Calen blurted out, "A beautiful little girl, and a baby. I don't know its gender. It was too young to even be named."

Zella and Dover stared at each other. Could it be?

"Blake told her the man she chose was dead. It's likely she died then too." Calen's gourd slipped out of his grasp.

Zella covered her mouth to hide the gasp. Dover's hands shook. "Was he dead?"

"No. Held captive," Calen said.

"Why?" Dover asked.

"Control of the wind energy, and light sources, the man brought from his distant villa. Blake didn't care about the beautiful woman, or her children. He didn't care about women."

"What about his own mother?" Zella asked.

"She never wanted him. He was a rattler. His mother knew the law, and said she wanted him. She grew to ignore him when her other children were born."

"Now we all suffer the result," Dover said.

Calen wiped away the tears. "He's not all bad. Though, he won't stop bad things from happening. I don't want to go back. They might lock me up too. I'd die. I don't care where we go. Maybe we can go

to Mills for help and then rescue Emory and find the children he sponsored."

"Blake sent you with us," Zella said.

"Yes. He and the roamers wanted me to kill you. Or, slow you down and let the lions kill you. I can't do that."

A crow cawed in the distance.

"Not intentionally anyway. Sorry about the sun sickness."

"Who all knows about what Blake is doing?" Dover asked.

"It's difficult to say. Most of Webbel, especially the men. They like the freedom Blake gives them," Calen said.

"I didn't see any women from Webbel," Zella said.

"You won't," Calen said. "I don't know what he is thinking.

Without women, he has no children to sponsor. Without children, he has no one to look after him when he is gen four, and that's not far off. The whole villa will die, and Goddess Amber will be vindicated."

"That's not the way to follow her laws," Zella said. "All these unknown people, what are they doing?"

"Blake doesn't care what the roamers, and the other villas do, as long as they dig and search for something. No one knows what."

"Anyone in other villas who follow him?" Dover leaned forward.

"A few perhaps. I can't be sure who all. Some may know more than others do. I'm not sure how many he trusts with what information. I think several people know something is different."

A rat raced to grab the meat Calen had thrown. After picking it up, the rat glanced at them, before racing off into the underbrush.

The wild animals here had no fear of humans. That was both good and bad. They wouldn't warn them if roamers had followed them.

"What about Varl, Vira, Sharel, and Nala?" Zella stirred the remaining stew.

"He has many, many roamer scouts who have joined Webbel hidden away. Ten were sent to follow the other dig leaders. They were hidden away from camp," Calen said.

Zella gasped. "I hope they survived."

Calen grunted. "Oh the women may be alive. The roamers have a bad habit of not killing the women. They keep them for other things, hidden in dug out rooms, with little food, and no light."

"Why don't they leave?" Dover asked.

"They can't leave. Only way in and out is a ladder that is pulled up when the entry in the ground is shut. They drag a hide of dirt across the entry, to keep the sunlight from creeping through," Calen

said.

"The women wouldn't have much air then," Dover said.

"I know," Calen said. "That's the way the roamers like them. Like the bad ancestors of old. They have a few small air holes, prairie dog hole sized. They made me go with them on one of the visits to the hidden places. Entombed. More dead than alive. I wouldn't join them in their games." He shuddered at the memory and held his hands.

Zella shivered at the thought of what the roamers were doing to women. Tanna and Robin were in danger.

"I couldn't help them escape. Too many roamers." His tears flowed freely.

"Do you remember where these places are?" Zella asked.

"I know where a few of the pits are. I hoped someday to be able to rescue the women. I never had the chance." He clenched his fists and stared at the sky. "That's how they kept those two men in the stone lodge." Zella said.

Calen relaxed. "I thought you knew. I guess I wanted you to. I was sure you saw the light."

"How does it work?" Captured light would be useful during winter's often dark nights. Especially during a baby's birth.

"A special non-vegetable gourd. I can use them, no idea how to make them."

"And the villa leaders?" Dover asked. His hand clasped Zella's.

"I wish I knew. Most of Webbel stay as far away from Blake and the roamers as possible. I know he has offered them knowledge about things they want. Blake hasn't told them what they have to do in exchange for that knowledge. I hope they never find out."

"I hope not as well," Zella said. "I fear they may know already."

"Especially Robin and Tanna, if they ever made it back."

Zella gasped. "What do you know?"

"I don't know much. I heard Blake laugh when Orid said he had a plan for those left in the villas. When Tanna and Robin didn't show up with you two, I couldn't say anything."

"We should go at once!" Zella screamed.

"No," Calen said. "It was already too late when you arrived. Even with Blake's secrets, I couldn't guarantee your safety. That's why I told Jorn to send back as many as he could."

"Can those three be trusted?" Zella said.

"I hope so." Calen said.

"Maybe the Goddess will give us an answer," Dover said.

The moon rose on three silent adults. What the men were thinking, Zella didn't know. They had to do something in the morning. Dover had said Calen couldn't travel until morning. Realistically, neither could she. Her arms ached from pulling the stretcher all day.

# Chapter 21

A breeze gently pushed and pulled on Tanna.

The roamer scouts screamed and scrambled. Their legs tied together, and arms tied behind their backs, they tripped and fumbled.

"Don't leave us here to die!"

"We won't do it again!"

Tanna almost relented.

Fendon stood strong with his fists clenched by his sides. His face contorted and turned away with his eyes closed.

Orid's yelled, "She won't let it happen. She's too weak. When we're loose."

The men's faces paled as the horses thundered across the plains.

Fendon faced the stampede.

A large herd of swift horses thundered toward the scouts.

Barking dogs squeezed the horses closer together, into a thin line.

Tanna closed her eyes.

Trumpeting horses drowned out the men's screams.

Her shawl flapped wildly against her leg. She wished she could ride the wind away from this scene of death and destruction. The swift wind of the horses passing almost pulled her along.

The horse's breath was strong. Mud and sweat poured off their backs.

Their ancestors had valued the horse. They had lost horses because of the thrill.

The sound of the horses died down as they whisked on across the plain. Her eyes opened.

Kol and Logan sat beside her, panting after their run.

Fendon dropped to the ground and breathed heavily.

Tanna bent over and reached down to pat the dogs, knowing they had worked hard today. Their training had done the work that needed to be done.

People pressed around her. They wanted to see what was left of the field. One person gasped.

Robin's hand rested on her shoulder.

She had to look, and didn't want to.

Tall grass was trampled.

The hunters who had followed the horse herd panted in the distance.

Parts of the men's bodies were scattered about the ground. Arms and legs not attached to trunks. Skulls busted, brains spilled on the ground. They would be left to the wolves, lions, and vultures. Hopefully, their evil would be separated and consumed, and hurt the community of villas no more.

It wasn't the bloody pieces of human flesh the people gaped at.

No roamer was left alive of the nine placed out to die. The Goddess had allowed the community to rid themselves of danger.

Two horses remained, standing quietly, waiting.

Tanna stepped closer. Perhaps they were an illusion. A shattered skull lay not far from her. Brain matter glistened on the dewy grass. Blood splashed everywhere, hopefully only from the roamers, and no horse had been hurt.

She shuddered.

The horses weren't babies separated from their mother.

Something about one of them was familiar.

A gasp behind her startled her.

The gen four grandmother was in the arms of two Almond women.

The statue pressed against her chest. Tanna pulled it out and stared.

The resemblance was remarkable. This horse could have belonged to the grandmother, from two, or was it three, generations ago. Horses don't live that long. Could it have retained some memory of being tame? The grandmother's horse must have escaped the massacre generations ago.

As she came closer, the horse pawed the ground, and snorted. It didn't appear injured. "Spirit horse, it is okay, I will take you to your friend, please come."

She reached a tentative hand forward.

The horse reared and neighed.

"Come." Tanna turned and walked back to the grandmother.

It snorted as it followed her.

She reached Robin and kept walking, hoping the horse would follow.

He took her hand, turned, and smiled at her.

She walked.

The gen four grandmother cried and reached her hands out to touch the horse. It snorted, and pawed the ground. "Sandy, my

Sandy, will there peace at last? I never meant for you to be hurt. You mustn't have been if you are here."

"How long do horses live?" Tanna asked.

The grandmother rubbed the horse's neck. "About a generation, or less. By one of our gens, they are very old."

The woman looked at the animal closely. "This animal, if my watery eyes don't deceive me, is about half a person's gen, and the one following her may be her daughter, about half her age. Perhaps they have some memory of people who were kind to them."

"Perhaps Goddess Amber gave them to us. Will they stay with us of their own choice?" Tanna asked.

The grandmother smiled and wiped her eyes. "I hope so. Perhaps not, though. We could build the horse lodge back."

Then she lowered her head. "No, I guess not, the new garden was planted there."

"Grandmother, lean against your friend. Let's walk back to the villa. Maybe the horses were given to us for a reason. A new horse lodge can be built next to your cow lodge." Tanna reached out to take her hand.

The gen four grandmother took her hand, and leaned against the horse.

Sandy nuzzled the top of her head.

People walked back to Almond without the burden of the roamers who had harmed them. They had received two gifts in return for preventing future harm to their villas.

Robin's arm was around Tanna's waist. She turned to smile at him and saw Uden talking to Fendon.

Fendon reached out to Corandra. As he touched the infant's hand, she squealed.

Corandra had been a normal infant. Now, she acted as if Fendon were her sponsor. Life would be easier on her if he had been. The people here would not forget that Uden admitted to Corandra being a rattler child.

Perhaps girl children were different from boys if raised by their mother. Possibly less likely to look like their mother's attacker. Obviously, boy children could turn out evil, carrying the evil of their creation throughout their lives. People shunned them, and expected them to be evil. Maybe it wasn't only expectation.

Grandmother had said something about another rattler child who grew up without knowing its mother. Who was that child, and how had she, or he, turned out?

As they entered the wall opening, Tanna and Robin slipped behind the gen four grandmother walking beside the horse.

A sight she had only dreamed of, a human touching a horse as they did a dog or a chicken. Sandy, as the grandmother had called her, did not act surprised at being touched. Though she and her offspring shied from the other members of the villa.

Even the young children gave them plenty of room. They had seen what damage horse's hooves could do.

Tanna squeezed Robin's hand and smiled. They had completed one dreadful task. Now though, their troubles had only begun. Someone would come searching for Orid and his friends.

The villa of Almond, now a combination of Almond, Shims, Lava, and Tuttle, must be protected.



## Chapter 22

Zella woke to the stars shining with a faint glow on the horizon. She wasn't sure how much of Calen's tale was true, and how much was an attempt to convince them to trust him.

Calen should be able to walk today.

After a more thorough search, she and Dover would decide if they should try to dig for a pit mine at this location, or travel on.

Wolves howled in the distance. The eerie sound broke the stillness of pre-dawn. Would she ever find peace and comfort again? Her spine tingled as a wolf howl sounded even closer to their camp.

Reaching over she woke Dover up. "Wolves, close."

"We will go soon," he mumbled, half asleep.

"What about Calen?"

"He has to go with us. We can't leave him here, for his safety, or ours."

Distrust and secrets. Like dry dirt and sand she had swallowed as a child. Two things she had avoided as much as possible her whole life, and now she had to face the secrets of others, and the distrust they had created.

The sunrise was colorful, yellows, and pinks and fluffy white around the edges. No red, thankfully. The storm season would be here soon.

After a quick breakfast of leftover rabbit, Zella and Dover lifted their gatherboards onto their backs.

"We won't go far today, Calen. Then we have to decide. You have to walk today." Zella waited.

His face showed no reaction. "I think I can make it. A ways at least. I can try. I never thought staying in one place and doing the easy work Blake wanted me doing would be such a bad decision."

Calen picked up his huntboard, which had been lightened after he fell ill. They trudged carefully though the tumbled sandy rocks.

At the edge of the brush and rocks, Zella held up her hand to wait before they stepped out onto the open plain. It was always best to view their position and be sure no lions were around.

Glancing as far as she could see, there was little obviously visible in this clearing. Rocks littered the ground, like what they occasionally found in some of the lower digging levels at Klapit. They were reddish rectangles, almost the length of her forearm, and double that width. Many were broken.

Small animal trails wove through the grass stems. Mice, moles, and rabbits had made their paths, trails, and homes among the scattered rocks. A few rabbits peeked out at them as they passed.

A brushy pile loomed over the grass in the distance.

They would dig nearby and rest in the shade during midday. It would be too hot to work then. Rest would be good. If they found something, they could return to Klapit. If they didn't, they could go somewhere else.

A scan through and around the brush showed no sign of wolves or lions recently using it. Bison, horses, or camels had avoided it as well. This spot must be off their migratory path.

She opened her gatherboard to reach for her digging tool.

"Can I help you dig?" Calen said. "I want to do something."

Zella wasn't sure if that was a good idea. After all, he might find something and hide it from them.

"I think it would be okay," Dover said. "You work over here in the shade, and don't overdo. It's a good way to test your strength."

Calen went to the slightly shady rise Dover had indicated.

Nothing on the ground grabbed Zella's attention. It didn't look like much. Good digging places rarely did. The gen four grandmothers gossiped about when items stuck out of the ground, and digging there was always worthwhile. They hadn't found any places like that in over a gen.

One of the now dead grandmothers had mentioned maps with directions to all the potential pit mines. She claimed to have seen it as a child in the hand of a roamer. Though how such a map could have been made, or read, no one living could guess. Uden's mother, Odalen might have known. After she had died, Uden had been sent to Webbel to learn from their clay designer.

There were the rectangular rocks, like the ones near Klapit, on the other side of the clearing. Maybe something good would come of this place.

Her digging tool slowly shifted the dirt. Past and future. Going back to Klapit was dangerous. Finding Varl, Vira, and their daughters was an unlikely adventure as well. Calen was the only one who might know where they might be, if they were alive.

Warm, salty tears slid down her cheek. Tanna and Robin's safety mattered most. If they made it to Lava, there would be only fourteen people. Only a few adults, and most of those past fighting age. There might be five able-bodied adults against Orid, and who knew how many scouts.

"Dover we have to go back."

"There is no telling what Jorn, Quan, Marin, and Irvin have decided. They may have gone to the villas."

"They may have fallen under Blake's shadow," Zella said.

"Perhaps, if they aren't sure what they should be doing," Dover said.

"I wouldn't want to be making their decisions. Ours are tough enough." Zella's tool hit something spongy. I could be an old newspaper. Another unstable artifact that no one living knew how to make.

Left on the ground, they rotted away in days. Buried underground, they could survive indefinitely, leaving her a record of life as it once was. They were rarely shown to the villas. Newspapers would quickly crumble to dust. Usually she, or another dig leader, read them quickly, and then reburied them so that another gen could read the tales.

That is, if future gens read. So few had any interest in learning what the letter games meant anymore. Most couldn't even spell their own names. How was a name like Corandra to be spelled in letters anyway? Letter pronunciation were so different than daily speech.

Zella dug to about the same depth at about the size she expected the paper to be. She gently pushed more dirt aside with her hands. It wasn't the kind of paper she expected. The paper was more like what they had found last night. Except it wasn't as tough, and might not last long. She picked it up and turned the pages.

She picked out the symbols, and read slowly, bit by bit. The words didn't make much sense at first, in and of themselves. They were words and sentences. They didn't have a beginning or an end. Closing it back, she read from the first page. Some pages were missing. She thumbed the pages, not reading. The layout was different. This wasn't a summary, like newspapers, or the segments and picture book from yesterday.

This was something else. It had to be more like tales. Tales though, were spoken. Remembered bits of wisdom passed along from the ancestors and told at evening fire pits to help the younger gens never forget the fear their ancestors lived through. They were meant to keep the future gens from repeating the mistakes of the past.

Their repetition appeared to have not worked with Blake and Orid.

The separating pages had fallen into her lap.

Dover glanced over to see what she had found. Together, they read a few pages, fumbling over some words that didn't make sense. The page was about a young couple building a home together.

Together? That didn't make sense. How could a person ever move from one villa to another, and fully acclimate? Adult males lived alone. Mothers raised the children, except in rare cases that a sponsor took a child to be raised in another villa, like Dover had taken Robin.

The mother chose which villa she wanted her children to learn from, and belong to. She wouldn't know enough about the sponsor's villa to be able to teach them. The children would have a place in society carved out for them from birth, or infancy.

Zella wanted to settle down and stay in one place. Maybe she was becoming old, like the gen four grandmothers, and the gardeners.

She turned the page.

They both read quicker. Before they realized it, they had reached a break in the tale. The tale talked about two people being together, as if they planned to live together, instead of visit for a night or two. The home they talked about sounded permanent.

In some ways, that sounded wonderful to Zella. Always having someone there to rely on. She had thought her daughter would always be there for her, except during summer travel season.

Sure, there ways were similar, and secrets were forbidden. However, lots of knowledge never passed from one villa to another. There was simply no reason to describe to every Lava member the musical talents of the Almond villa. Most had no interest, and others couldn't learn it as well as the musical Almond members. Of course, the Shims villa had some secrets. Though they willingly shared their medical knowledge with everyone, there had to be things they knew that no one else did. Even Tuttle and Webbel had specialties of their own braiding ropes, and weaving shawls and tunics.

To settle down, and not move constantly, would be nice. To have someone other than one's children, or nieces and nephews, to rely on would make middle adulthood easier, as long as they got along. Differences in their lifestyles kept the five villas from living together peacefully. Maybe it could work, at least at her age.

"I found something!" Calen waved his arms.

Zella covered a smile. He hadn't worked for many seasons. He always checked to see what others had found in Klapit, or reported

to Blake.

She walked over to see what he had. It wasn't more paper, or dry rotted wood. Their pits were shallow. Plastic might be in these layers. She could see through it, and most plastic couldn't be seen through.

The item glinted in the sunlight. She touched the edge carefully and smiled. Not plastic, it was glass. A rare find. Most of the pieces were so tiny, and they broke easily, they were rarely used. Dover kept some for medical purposes too. They made excellent cutting tools. She handed it to Dover, as he would have a safe place to keep it.

"Do you think this is another pit, or only random bits Calen?"

"I think this may be the place our villa comes from. Water washed our villa away, and then disappeared a few gens ago, that is why we left. Our lore says we couldn't go north because of the water rise, though we were closer to the northern villas."

"I didn't know there were many northern villas."

"Some. Mills knows a few. I don't know how many," Calen said. "I'm sure there are far more than we know about. If each villa was connected to the one north, south, east, and west, think how many connections there might be."

"I'm not sure that would be a good thing," Zella said.

"Why not?" Calen said. "Don't you want to know everything there is to know? Don't you want to be able to know what happened to the ancestors, and why?"

Zella turned to Dover and then back to Calen. "I think we are seeing what happened to the ancestors, and why. Much as Goddess Amber said, secrets are dangerous, and Webbel kept secrets that mattered. Why did it happen, and how?"

Calen looked down at his hands, carefully examining the lines on them. "They. No, Blake wanted to rule alone and over everyone, like the rulers of old. He wanted everything his way, rather than going along with the needs and wishes of others. I think it goes back to his mother."

Blake's mother had been leader of the Webbels as Zella's gen grew up. She couldn't remember anything bad about her. "His mother was a kind, fair person. She was a good leader."

"No," Calen said. "She looked like a good leader to all the outsiders, and even to most of the Webbels. She kept a secret she shouldn't have."

Calen looked up into her eyes. "Blake was a rattler. She thought

she wanted him, until he grew to look like the roamer who attacked her."

"Why did she keep the secret?"

"When Blake looked like the roamer, she already had another child. So she focused on the daughter, then on the others who came after. She thought Blake would never know. He knew. Even his walking by startled her. When he was ten, she was afraid of him. And he knew it."

"She turned the leadership over to him long ago," Dover said.

"No, not really." Calen played in the dirt, letting it slide through his hands. "He told her he was taking control. He told her if she didn't let him be in control, he would tell everyone her secret. I'm not sure if she was more afraid of him, or the rest of the Webbels."

Zella found his tale hard to believe. A mother wouldn't dream of being treated that way by her child. A woman simply wouldn't allow a child, and a son at that, to make decisions for her. She'd be expected to banish him from the community of villas first.

However, Zella had never been afraid of her own child. She had been afraid for both of them, not of them. What would she have done if her son who didn't survive, had said that to her?

"How can you know these things?" Zella asked.

With a sheepish grin on his face. "Well, I liked his sister, when she was about Tanna's age, and she had agreed to meet with me. I overheard the conversation outside their summer lodge. His sister and I ran and hid. I don't think he knows that I know about that."

"His mom died soon after, I think," Dover said. "No one knew what was wrong. Her other children went to live with their sponsors?"

"Yes," Calen said. "It was a shock. They didn't know the Tuttle villa lifestyle. They understood tools, and quickly developed an interest in weaving and fiber plants to stay away from their brother. They weren't happy."

"Did any return to Webbel?" Zella asked.

"I think they wondered off to Mills, one of the villas that traded with the Webbels. They tried to move as far away as possible, hoping he would forget them. His mom made him feel unwelcome as a child, so he made his sisters feel unwanted as adults," Calen said.

"If that's the way the ancestors lived and thrived, no wonder they died the way they did. That battlefield we passed overflows with scars," Zella said.

"There is another battlefield we pass," Dover said. "We always

try to avoid it. The horses run through the place so many of their ancestors died in. They don't hide from it."

"Perhaps we need to remember it the way they do. Though, I'd rather forget it," Zella said.

"Wouldn't we all," Dover said. "Let's eat something and decide where we are going. We have to leave soon. Calen, are you up to walking?"

"Does it matter? We have to rescue those trapped women. We have to find Varl and Vira if they are alive."

"And Tanna and Robin as well," Zella said.

Calen reached for his huntboard. "Let's start now. I'm nervous about being here, in this field. It's too open."

They might not walk far today. The open field so full of life, was empty of the child she had raised to adulthood. Every step back would be a step closer to Tanna, and her community. Somehow, she had to save them, if she could. She would silently sing the songs of the ancestors all the way, and try to remember the Goddess Amber's words of wisdom. She would remember the words.

## Chapter 23

Tanna walked away from the scene of the gruesome stampede. She didn't look back. Everyone would follow her. To glance back would show she questioned if they would. It would be fun to watch the gen four grandmother with the horse. It was amazing to think of the animal so close to people, even though she knew they once were.

She reached the villa.

A circle of people from the four represented villas formed around the main fire pit.

The cleansing ceremony would unintentionally be changed. Zella hadn't had her practice it often. Maybe it changed every generation.

Everyone looked at her.

While it made her nervous, she knew her role. "We have allowed the Goddess Amber to decide the fate of those who harmed us. Our work is not done. The rest of Webbel must come back and declare their secrets, or be asked to move outside of our community. We must find the rest of the council. Most of you cannot travel."

No one spoke during the long pause. "Would the six hunters be willing to stay behind and protect the people here?"

Gel, Haro, and Kleal from Lava, and Wale, Ida, and Brix from Shims each grabbed their own spear, and set it in front of them.

They'd stay.

"Robin and I must leave. We must return to Klapit and determine what the Webbels are doing. We will leave today. Uden will stay behind. She is not well enough for the trip. We will need supplies."

"No! Don't leave me!" Rusty screamed as she ran into the circle.

The horses next to the grandmother shifted and snorted.

The girl raced up, and wrapped her arms around Tanna.

Patting her head and wiping away her tears, Tanna bent down. "Rusty, you won't be able to keep up. We aren't going to rest much. We hope to make it in two marches instead of four. Stay, and take care of your brother."

"Leave brother with Uden. Those horses, they have to have escaped from Webbel. Maybe from some of those roamers who attacked us," Rusty sobbed.

Tanna looked down at Rusty. "Tell that to everyone here, please."

Rusty turned around, wiped her eyes, and took a deep breath.



"These two horses must have escaped from Webbel. Please, let me go too."

Robin stepped up beside her. "The danger is too great. You have responsibilities here. Both your brother, and your garden. Do you want to ignore your responsibilities at so young an age?"

Tanna fought to hide a smile. That ought to help. No one of any age, wanted to be accused of ignoring responsibilities.

"It's mine to save everyone. I have to. My mom, and my sponsor, were both part of the problem."

"Rusty, child, you did nothing wrong. Your mother and sponsor did no wrong. We do not know their ways, and they did not know ours. They did not attack our villas. People within our own community of villas allowed roamers to attack us. While we thank you for wanting to fix the problem, it's not your problem to fix. You are needed here. We might lose you. And they might hurt you worse." Rusty would make a good leader one day. She pleaded her case as any strong apprentice leader would.

"Please." Rusty looked up at her with tears in her eyes. "I can sneak into places they won't care about. I'm little. They don't expect me to know anything."

Tanna shuddered as she thought of what this girl, one-third her age, must have been through to think such things.

"Rusty, if your brother isn't enough, will you stay for one more reason?"

"What reason?" Rusty mumbled. She wiped her eyes and tried not to sniffle.

"We need you here in case any of the Webbels come back here before we return." And in case we don't. "We need you here to help these people from all four villas know what to expect, and how to protect themselves. You know far more about what the Webbels know than anyone else. Can you do that for me? For your brother?"

Rusty wavered.

"How about for your mom and sponsor? Wouldn't they rather you had people around who would protect you?"

Rusty gulped. "Okay. I can teach you how to ride the horses and use them to help you."

Tanna smiled. "That would be an excellent idea. And whatever else you can tell us, will help too. Uden will be here for you."

Rusty ran back to Kol to hide her tears.

Tanna turned back to the group. "You have heard Rusty. Though she is an unknown child, she must be given status. Treat her as you

wish to be treated. Learn what you need to of Webbel knowledge. Hopefully there will be no more trouble." Tanna turned her eyes to the gen four grandmother. "Grandmother, I hope you do not mind me taking your horse to try to save our community."

The grandmother smiled. "You must. I want to visit with her while you eat, please. I would thank you." Her smile brightened as she patted the horse beside her. It seemed to calm remarkably.

Would this horse, Sandy, be willing to go back to the Webbels?

The tiny villa buzzed with people. It was too small for a trade meeting, or summer gathering. Almond was adapting to members from the other villas. The other villas were adjusting to this new place, and not knowing where food and tools were stored. Drea showed someone from the Tuttle villa where to find food to gather for Tanna and Robin.

Part of the Shims villa had collected medicinal plants, and built temporary racks for drying, too close to Almond's accustomed walkways. They weren't used to having to work beside lodges instead of under them. Next to the medicinal racks were a few quickly thrown together Tuttle looms, almost never seen side by side. A few Lava members tried to teach the young children tales. They too were underfoot. Almond drums and flutes were scattered about on the ground, and others on logs. People tripped over each other in unexpected places, raising the tension levels.

The scene reminded Tanna of a tale she had heard about the ancient ancestors. Once, all knowledge was shared, much like this. Now, each villa specialized. A child would move to the villa of the person they most favored, so they would grow up with the tools they were best suited for.

One of the Almond villa nodded at the mess. "Tanna, who will be in charge while you are gone? What if you don't return? What if no one does?"

Tanna was sore from learning to ride a horse. While the horses accepted her and Robin, they were nervous and shied away when too many people crowded close, often causing them to lose their balance. After several tries, they managed to stay upright, even when a group from Shims had walked by waving leaves and branches at them.

"Normally, the Almond villa as a whole would be in charge, as this is their villa," Tanna said.

"Yes, though it's not the same now. What do you want us to do?"

Another decision Tanna didn't want. She could tell them to make

the decision themselves.

As a leader's daughter and niece, she knew the individuals from other villas far better than the Almond group did. Most villas only knew a few people from the other villas. "When we gather round the fires for our midday meal, we will all decide together," Tanna said.

Would it be best for the group of mismatched skills to work together, or as individuals? Word spread and everyone expected the announcement. She picked up her wooden platter, filled it full of food, and sat down next to Robin.

"Don't worry. They'll do what's needed." Robin smiled.

She glanced at him, and then back at her plate. "I wish. We have gen four grandparents, infants, toddlers, and new mothers all here. They all have skills. We aren't leaving a single person who has any leadership qualities behind, other than the hunters."

She gulped a large bite of food. This might be her last good meal for a while.

Robin's hand touched her arm. "One. Though young, you already told her to help the others. She has seen more of this style camp than anyone else, even us." He waved his arm to include the confused arrangement of musical instruments, drying racks, and weaving looms spilled across the area in front of the treasury.

"I heard Rusty today, trying to help people set up things so they wouldn't be in each other's way. She can help them figure out how to work together."

"Good," Tanna said.

"All of our tool makers are Webbels." She whispered to Robin, not wanting anyone to hear the fear and concern in her voice.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to have one villa that specialized so much. If they had no more tools, the Almond villa wouldn't have flutes or drums. The Shims wouldn't have medical tools. The gardeners and collectors, like Zella, wouldn't have digging tools. And Tuttle wouldn't have the tools they needed to cut and prepare ropes, looms, and nets to catch fish. They needed other tools, to hunt, and protect themselves.

"I think we are beginning to see a change. Some here can create tools, and teach others. Ask the gen four grandsponsor. A few others know basics. If the young children learn now to know many skills, it'll help. Who better to make a tool than the one who uses it, at least if they can." He glanced at the noisy group.

A toddler chased a dog carrying her new drumstick across his gatherboard.

Not all people who could use a tool had the skill or dexterity to make it. Learning how a tool was made would give a new sense of appreciation for the tool as it was used.

She finished eating.

The group waited to hear every word she said.

"First, as always, work for the benefit of the community. Each must use their individual strengths. We do not know if the rest of our villas will be able to come back."

Gasps echoed.

"Please." She raised her hand. "I am not trying to scare you. We have no idea if, or when, the Webbels roamers will be back. Or what they will bring with them. We must be prepared. Everyone should attempt to learn to make basic tools. The grandsponsors can show you the basics. Tools of all kinds. You may need them."

Their fear echoed as they rustled and whispered.

"I want everyone here to learn the basics of medicinal plant collection. Ask the young mothers from Shims to help you recognize the basic first aid plants. When, and where to collect and store them." The three young women smiled. She could tell they were pleased with their anticipated contribution.

"Next, I expect everyone here to learn the basics of rope winding and clothes production. We have several from Tuttle who can teach. Maybe new designs will come from the combined work of grandmothers and young children."

The grandmothers held up a few babies, and smiled at the group.

"Almond is providing us with a wonderful garden. All the gardeners will assist Drea here. We must all respect their ways while we stay here, and ever afterwards. Listen to their tales and music every night. Practice repeating their tales as well. Our tales must be preserved."

"We have the six hunters."

They sat partially off to the side. They obviously felt out of place in this gathering of women, children, and elderly.

"They will teach the older children basic trapping and hunting skills, both for protection, and food gathering. They will share the responsibility for the protection of the Almond villa."

The hunters lifted their spears in a signal of friendship.

"Lastly," Tanna said. "Rusty will be our greatest help. She will teach you what she knows about the Webbels. She will help you decide what you need to do while we are gone. Work for the group

as whole, while learning everything you can. Our community may depend upon it."

All eyes were on Tanna. It was the only thing she could think of. The only solution to involve everyone, keep the camp active, and not petrified with fear.

"Glenna, if you are finished eating, please begin with one of the elder tales. I want to hear you repeat it yourself. The gen four grandmothers will verify it is correct."

Glenna gulped as she sat down her platter. She sat up as straight as she could. Using her hands as well as her words, she began the tale of the fiery clouds of dust and ash that brought constant movement to the land.

As the tale continued, people's faces relaxed. Even though the tale told of the death and destruction of people, animals, and land, it was familiar. A good choice.

Soon after the meal, Tanna sat on the horse the grandmother had called Sandy. She seemed gentle enough. Tanna longed to run through the grasses. The back of a horse might not be as safe as her dream had been.

Tanna urged the horse forward.

At first, Sandy didn't want to go.

Gel reached over and slapped Sandy's back end.

Tanna held on.

Robin's horse tried to keep up.

At least they were pointed in the correct direction. This would be a long, scary trip. Wind whipped their faces as they sped across the grasslands. Everything appeared so different from up on a horse's back. For one thing, she could see over all the grass tops, not only the shorter, grazed areas. The scrub brush she knew existed a march or more away, was visible now. When walking, it wasn't visible until she almost reached it.

"We could go anywhere, and recognize landmarks quickly. Less risk of being lost," Robin said.

"As long as we can control the horses. This is fun. I hope they don't decide to leave us when we rest." Tanna turned the horse slightly.

"They didn't leave today when they had a chance. There are an awful lot of coyotes and hyenas over there." Robin pointed.

"We've already reached the stampede spot. We could reach Klapit sooner than we expect." Tanna shifted her weight.

The horses neighed and shied away from the carnage.

Carnivores fought over the bones and ignored the horses.

The horses stumbled past the bloodshed. Sandy snorted and reared as two coyotes raced in front of her dragging something, and snarling at each other.

Tanna fought to stay on the horse.

"Well, we can see far, as long as what we want to see is above the grass tops. In this high stuff, we can't see normal things. Not much help is it."

A lion, or anything else, could be hidden, waiting for them somewhere. Even the roamers could hide from them.

Kol and Logan had not followed them from the stampede area. That was an unsettling thought. The dogs could become lost out here, if the people on horseback went a route the dogs weren't used to going.

Time spent riding didn't pass the same as walking either.

The horses slowed at the entrance of the Klapit cow lodge.

"When did you find the horses?" Erin leaned against the wall.

"They are helpful," Tanna said.

"Some of the roamers think so too. They catch them. Apparently, away beyond the Mad Gods, there is a place where people keep horses and use them every day. I guess you will bring that to us now. That would be good," Erin said.

"Or not," Robin said. "We already see problems with it. We have to go on."

"Careful, or you won't be able to walk tomorrow." An odd laugh trickled out as Erin turned to her herd of sheep. "I'm surprised Uden and your young friend isn't with you. Where did you leave them?"

"In a safe place," Tanna said.

Kol and Logan better catch up soon.

Erin was at least partially right. They would be sore from riding. Her legs already ached from all the practice. Bruises covered her arms and legs. She tried to find a way she could sit more comfortably.

Something was wrong with Erin.

"Do you think we should take one of the cleared walkways?" Tanna asked.

"No," Robin said. "While they might be quicker, we would be seen by animals and people."

"I don't think we should talk much either." Her own thoughts led down trails of tales as she searched for answers. Fear escalated due to Erin's strange behavior.

Logan and Kol ran up, tongues hanging out.

Where they had been?

Horses always travelled in herds, unless perhaps when foaling. Two living horses alone in Klapit would be unexpected. However, to leave them behind could mean an uncertain future for the horses, and the people.

The horses shuffled and pulled nervously as they approached Klapit.

Zella and Dover needed to be found. Let the hard work rest on someone else's shoulders a while.

Something was wrong though.

Shuffling sounds and loud unknown voices weren't far away.

Grass moved, and the wind wasn't blowing.

## Chapter 24

Zella, Dover, and Calen hurried back to the creek to fill their water gourds.

Calen sat beside the stretcher he had rode on. He fingered the limbs and touched the grass they wove to hold his feet still. The ancestral object had fallen off, and rolled to the side.

Dover picked it up and placed it in his gatherboard.

"I'll be back." Zella pushed her way through the underbrush to where she had hidden the strange pages of tales. She hid the pages they had found the night before in the bottom of her gatherboard. It was too valuable to leave behind for animals, or roamers, to destroy. A pile of broken red rock on top of the boulder would leave a reminder of where she had found the pages, if she ever came back.

Returning to the creek, she sat beside Dover. "I'd rather find Tanna and Robin and be sure they are safe. Uden wouldn't be much help in protecting them."

"I think they are safe. They are too smart to walk into an ambush." Dover closed his gatherboard. "If we don't find Vira and Varl, who will be dig leader in their villas?"

"We need more than three of us, or even seven to protect Tanna, Robin, and Uden." Calen covered his head with one arm to block the sun.

"If we had all stayed in one place, it wouldn't have happened," Zella said.

"Tired of traveling?" Calen said. "I was once. That's how I got into this condition."

He sat up. "The ancestors wanted us to keep moving for a reason, maybe lots of reasons. Now, I wish I had listened to them, instead of Blake."

"You, and both of us, might not be alive if you had listened," Dover said.

"My death might have sparked something sooner. We will never know. I wish I could travel better." Calvin pushed against the stretcher.

"Maybe there are more people who are sick of Blake's ways. Maybe some can secretly join us," Dover said.

"Like those men in the dig lodge." The memory of the light glancing off faces as the stooped shouldered men were led back to hide in a pit in the floor stirred Zella to her feet.



"We have to hurry." She pulled her gatherboard tight, and gripped the limbs from the stretcher. No point in leaving them behind. Calen might need them again.

They stepped out of the brush and into the grasslands. Their trail was faint, as they intended. Dover, a head taller, stepped out to look for signs of lions, and then back for Zella to lead.

The only woman in the group, Zella was expected to lead, even if Dover was the better trail reader. She was both an offering to the Goddess, and in the best position to hear the high-pitched wild animal sounds that women tended to hear before men.

Dover walked beside Calen, and could call for her. He helped him through the rough spots when needed. The grass grew high, and Calen fought for breath as the heat increased.

They had to stop after only a half march. By their second half march, Calen had trailed behind.

"Hopefully we can find the hunters from the rest of the villas, before Blake decides to do anything." Calen panted in the heat.

"What would he do?" Dover asked.

She didn't want to guess. The changes she had seen were bad enough.

"Let's rest." Calen said.

Zella and Dover sat down.

Calen tiptoed to peek as far as he could over the top of the grass. He relaxed. "Okay, let's not talk much unless we whisper about our plans. Some roamers have excellent hearing, and are exceptional at hiding. Many of them are reported to be rattlers kicked out of distant villas."

Zella and Dover drew closer.

He turned his head around, and listened to the breeze blowing. "I know something. Blake found Westpit, or so he named it. He claimed to be sending Varl and Vira in search of it. He knows where it is."

"What?" Blake wasn't who everyone thought he was.

"He takes people, and makes them weak, then forces them to dig for him. I think he is looking for something. I don't know what. I haven't been there."

"Then you don't know." Dover said.

"The men in the dig lodge were part of the group that were forced to make a wall. Blake put people inside to work and they couldn't escape."

"They could step over a wall." Zella pulled pieces of grass and

started weaving.

"Those long white, or grey, stretches of rock that we find, often in long lines across the prairie, can be broken. Then they are pulled up to stand in the ground, like jagged teeth in a jaw. Walls so high you can't reach over them standing on someone's shoulders."

Calen twisted his hands. "It's dry there, with little rain and few storms. Little grass grows, and few animals, so no one goes there. Who knows, maybe it was cursed by the ancestors. Maybe we shouldn't let anyone go there."

"Why are you telling us this now?" Dover asked.

"I fear. Zella, I fear tales you used to tell. The ancestors warned us of people who didn't care about others. What if he steals a few members of the villas, herds them there, and they can't escape? Blake may promise to let the ones he stole go free. He may block everyone inside."

Zella shivered in the warm sunshine. Blake is searching for something he feels is important, if he would so blatantly break the ancestor's laws. Secrets and violence among the villas had been unheard of for several gens now.

"Those men got out of the walls. He'd have to open them for more people to enter." Dover said.

"I'm not sure how," Calen said. "Maybe they worked outside. Maybe they are people who lower food and water in for the men and women he has in there. I don't know if I wish that he would find what he is searching for, so he would let them go. Or, that he doesn't find it. Because he might use it, whatever it is, to kill or maim more people."

"He can't have many people in there. Leaders would notice if villa members were missing." Zella said.

"Blake took people from Shells and Mills, Shells had no contact with any outsiders. You said he never told any of the other four villas about Shells and Mills. There are always roamers from who knows where appearing at Klapit. Other villas that we don't know must be growing too big also, and sending unwanted people out on their own, with nowhere to go."

"It's a long way back. We have to save some strength for when we return too." Dover shouldered his gatherboard and tapped Calen's shoulder.

Calen's face was pale. He nodded and drank some water.

Heat and sunshine beat down on them. Birds circled far in the distance. Being in front gave Zella the opportunity to sort through,

and silently chant, the tales of Goddess Amber.

An occasional animal ran across the trail in front of them. Rabbits hopped out of the way, and peeked back between stems, nibbling the undergrowth. Rattlesnakes slithered away as they walked past.

They were almost to the stream where the juvenile lion cubs had jumped on her. Carefully, she scanned the area. The lioness might be long gone, unless this area was a common horse, or other large animal, migration route. Lions could be near, dozing either in the sun where the horses grazed, or in the shadows near the creek.

Zella held out her hand, palm up, motioning the men to wait. The grasshoppers chirped, and rodents of all kinds scurried through the grass on their personal paths. Nothing seemed out of place. No tension or fright in the air.

She stepped carefully, listening as every twig snapped, and scanned through the dense grass. Nothing unusual. Under the dense brush were freshly chewed bones. She picked one up. The bones were about right for the horse kill. Lions must be comfortable here. Many sets of paws had trodden much of the grass near the stream bank.

Dover and Calen followed her cautiously as they approached the place they had hid from the lion cubs. No sign of lions here. The normal sounds of brush life stirred up by the three of them continued, cautious creatures, not afraid.

Zella sat down by the stream. She had known Calen since he was a boy. They had grown up looking forward to summers together to explore, dig, and find new things. They had dreamed of finding the ancestral tools that meant they would never go hungry. The ancestors had some way to store food regardless of weather conditions, and they wanted to find it together, and share it with their families and friends so no one would ever be hungry. Back then, even Blake had been friendly, and said he wanted to help the villas find what the ancestors left for them.

"We can rest here. It's a good march from here. Calen, do you remember this spot?"

"No, not from the last visit. I think I may have been here once long ago when I went out with hunters. Before I decided to be a dig leader." He sat down, and picked up a few pebbles in his hand.

"Wish I hadn't." He lifted his hand and let the pebbles fall out. "It's sad when no one wants an inherited position. I didn't want to hurt mom, so I agreed."

Calen picked up a stick and drew a circle in the sand. "Orid's

mother said I was his sponsor. I had to raise him because she died. She was from Shims. I knew I needed to keep my status for him, whether I wanted it or not."

He added a smaller circle inside the original. "He hurts things; plants, animals, even people. Blake laughs. I'm not like that. I am calm, quiet, and could never hurt anyone." He dropped the twig and looked at Zella and Dover.

"He wasn't mine, was he?"

She couldn't answer him.

"Once, our ancestors would say it took more than being a biological donator to be a parent, whatever that means. Now, I think we can say it takes more than being born, to be the child of your mother." Most children treated their mother and sponsor well. It was expected. She couldn't imagine growing old without Tanna there to care for her, as she once cared for tiny Tanna, born earlier than most. If Dover hadn't been at her birth, Tanna wouldn't have survived, regardless of Zella's own healing skills.

"Orid made his choice. He is an adult now." Zella crushed the grass in her hand.

"His mother." Dover stared off into the distance.

By not finishing the sentence, Zella knew what he meant. Orid had been a rattler, and should have been left to die. Calen had never been told that she took herbs to end her life after leaving Orid at his lodge. No point in telling him now.

"Orid is much worse than you know. Probably, much worse than I know. I think he has many friends among the roamers, if such people can be called friends. I wish I could have reached him. I tried."

Zella didn't want to know more right now. Her stomach clutched at the thoughts of what Orid might do if he found Tanna and Uden.

"Calen, at what point should we turn the direction you want us to go." Zella changed the conversation as she pulled out the remnants of their food supply.

Calen's face cleared a little as he focused on the issues at hand. He took a handful of dried vegetables. He added them to his bowl, and set it by the stream to soak in a little water, and for the sun to heat. Fire here was a risk, due to roamers and lions. "I have no idea. There are so many places. It depends on who Blake sent where after we left."

Zella sat in silence, waiting on Calen. His opinion from here on out mattered, whether she liked it or not.

"I think," Calen stammered. "I think we should go the route we came for a ways further, so we don't miss Klapit all together. When we reach a certain rise, we need to turn west, and come in from that angle."

Zella picked up her bowl to drink her cold soup.

A short march later, and they turned west.

At the sound of voices, they slid down to the ground and crept forward.

Flies buzzed in the blazing sun. It was not a normal sunny day. There shouldn't be this many flies with no animals around.

"They weren't any fun." One male said.

"No fight left in them." The second male's deep voice boomed across the grass.

Zella shivered.

A third voice laughed. "Don't worry. Something will happen soon. Blake is waiting on Orid to come back."

"Yeah, Orid and his other scouts too."

"Orid will be slowed down by the people he brings. Even prodding them, they can't move fast. It may be a day or two. We are going to have to make these women last."

A fly buzzed in front of her eyes. The men were almost close enough to touch. She couldn't brush the fly off.

"Toss them some stale water and some old veggies, they'll last." The man laughed.

Deep voice said, "Wonder how many of the scout's group he will send to Westpit?"

"Too many, that's for sure."

The sounds of their voices faded into the distance.

Zella tried hard not to throw up. This sounded awful. Somehow, she had to save them. She didn't know where to begin. With only Calen and Dover. Calen might be their only hope.

She motioned the men to her. "Calen, how far?"

"Not far, that way." Calen pointed. "Sounds like they left the pits. We better go now."

"The pits have been around how long, Calen?"

Calen sighed. "For food."

"For people?"

"Food for the people yes." He looked at her, then away as he closed his eyes.

"Used to hold people, since last winter, I think."

"Take us there now."

He nodded. "You won't like it. I don't."

## Chapter 25

Grass swayed gently in a rising breeze as the indistinguishable voices drifted closer along the path to their right. An unnaturally high laugh pierced the distance.

Tanna and Robin slid off the horses, and hid in the grass beside them. Her body ached from remaining motionless so long.

The murmur of voices drifted away.

Rays of sunlight played through the grass as the sun lowered to the horizon. Wild horses pawed and snorted nearby. Sandy and her companion kept their heads high, alert, and ears perked. They did not lower their heads to nibble the grass.

Tanna had no idea what to do next. They had to move nearer the camp to find her mom and Dover.

Darkness crept in.

The rest of the villas should have returned to camp. Gel had told them of the early hunt trip that Blake had sent everyone on, even the women and children who normally stayed behind. The dig leaders should have been there, and the summer garden that Webbel had added several trade meets before. No singing, or voices, could be heard. No fires popped in the evening breeze.

Tanna reached for Sandy's rope. The closeness of the horse left her reassured somehow, even with those dangerous hooves, still blood stained from the events of the early morning. She peeked under the horse's neck. With Goddess Amber's help, people would see the horse, and not her.

It was almost dark. A few stars twinkled in the sky.

They approached the clearing.

The place appeared deserted. No people, or camp, in sight.

Off in the distance, an eerie light glowed. To the west of Klapit, where Blake did not allow them to go.

Robin saw it too.

Rather than go through the clearing, Tanna turned back and went through the tall grass, keeping the clearing to her right. She led Sandy.

Robin followed behind with his horse.

Logan and Kol were nowhere in sight.

Tanna glanced from the ground in front of her, to the light she was following. The light moved west as well. A moving light was unusual. Something she had never seen. When people carried

torches, they flicked far more than this light did. Torches had to be carried above the grass level. These lights were closer to the ground, almost knee height. The light moved at the same speed she did.

Perhaps her perception was off, and the light was further away than it appeared.

Figures of people walked on the edges of the low-level lights. The light moved along at less than half their height.

She followed them from well inside the Grass Sea.

The light paused, not far from where she was. Another slow-moving group joined the people with the light. They were close enough to hear loud voices now.

"Brought some of the women," one voice said. "It wouldn't be as much fun without them."

Harsh laughter sounded through the grasses.

"Glad you made it, almost to the clearing. Tomorrow, we march to Westpit," Blake said. "There was no need to bring those women. They look too weak to walk tomorrow. You don't need them anyway. Send them back to their homes."

Laughter resounded as the men walked on. "No way. We can't turn them loose. They might find your friends. We'll keep them as long we can."

Tears formed in Tanna's eyes. No women's voices had echoed or sung in the night air. The strange men said there were some with them. She watched closely as the group moved off. Towards the end of the line, some people moved, and tripped, as if their hands were tied.

"Move along!" One male voice yelled.

Tanna recognized none of the male voices. A good thing, perhaps. If roamers were keeping women silent, it was better than if someone in their own villas were hurting women. She'd have to rescue Zella, Vira, or Nala if she could find them.

She kept her distance, and stayed quiet. A rescue would require more light, and knowing who she was rescuing. Her mind raced, trying to figure out who the men and women were, and how she could rescue them with only herself and Robin.

The group gathered around a large fire at the edge of a much smaller clearing.

Leading Sandy, she crept as close as she dared.

The women, if the skeletons with long faces dressed in rags, their hands tied in front, could be called women anymore, huddled



near the flames for warmth. None were recognizable.

Tanna's blood boiled. She wanted to rush out there and do something. Anything. They would end up captive too, if she and Robin tried to do anything alone. Maybe if they quietly listened, she would hear something useful, or find a way to sneak in and release them. Crouched in the grass, she held the lead rope of her mare loosely. Hopefully, the men would not see two horse heads over the grass tops in the dark.

Robin tapped her shoulder and pointed to the horses and back the way they had come. He crept off with his horse.

Not her choice. It might be safest for them, and the horses. She followed him back to a dead scrub tree that had long fallen. They tied the ropes long enough that the horses could graze.

Her stomach churned. They crept back to the clearing.

Hopefully, the men would drink something that would help them sleep, and forget to post a watch. She would have to be ready. Dried meat and her water gourd would give her energy for a rescue.

Tanna tried to match each voice with an outfit. Not an easy match, when most of the men's clothes were in little better condition than the frightened women's rags.

An ancestor's tale of battles came to life in front of her. Her eyes wanted to close and block out the living nightmare.

Robin took out some dried meat as well. He sat beside her and held her hand.

There would be enough water for tonight. They would worry about more, tomorrow.

The women clustered close to the fire, faces ashen, holding their tied hands across their chests. One though, could barely sit up. She kept falling over. The other women appeared to ignore her. There were subtle movements of heads as they glanced at the falling woman.

The men roasted fresh meat on the fire pit. Talking and laughing they shared around a water gourd. Apparently, the drink was intoxicating. As the men became louder, they occasionally staggered up to a woman and clawed at her, and then backed away.

"This is the last of the bison meat." One roamer held a stick with a bit of meat dangling.

A chorus of joy echoed through the roamer's cheers.

The women stared down at the ground.

"You held none back?" Blake asked.

"You said not to." Another overzealous man slapped Blake on

the shoulder.

Blake turned to the man. "I suppose so. With none left, Almond and Tuttle will easily find another pit to dig in. We'll keep these women close for making clothes and cooking. Though, you need to feed these women so they can make you new clothes. Why do you treat them so bad? Only a few deserved it, and they are already dead."

The men laughed loudly at Blake.

"As for Shims and that trouble making Lava villa, they can stay inside Westpit, and dig forever! We have so much to find to understand the ancestors. They don't have as much interest in digging as I thought they would. Zella seems to have lost her desire to dig and share knowledge."

One man by the fire hadn't touched the water gourd. "If they have many children, it will become too crowded soon."

Blake laughed. "We will need replacement diggers. Most of them won't live too long once I send in a few of my scouts to make them work faster. We can pull most of their men out and make them build pathways and such. Let the women do the work in the pit. Then no children will be born." His laugh was loud and harsh to Tanna's ears.

Blake planned to destroy their villas. Her hands trembled. She hoped the women would not suffer tonight for her indecision.

Robin didn't have any ideas either.

Tanna jumped and a shiver went up her spine as something touched her legs.

Kol and Logan panted, as if from a long run.

Tanna smiled as she reached to them. They needed to rest. There might be plenty of running later tonight. Though she had no idea where they could run to.

Logan turned his head, and looked off into the dark, beyond the horses. He let out a low whine, so low only Tanna could hear it.

"Be back," she whispered to Robin.

She grabbed her spear and crawled off behind Logan. He led her back the way they had come.

Beyond kicking range of Robin's horse, Jorn sprawled in the grass.

## Chapter 26

Zella shook her head. Calen's tales of women forced to live in pits were disgusting. She wished Calen had come and begged them for help. Maybe he hadn't known who to trust either.

Even though voices could sound different when a person's personality changed, Zella didn't think those men were originally Webbels.

Calen led single file along the path the scouts had sauntered down. His steps slowed. He held up his hand, and motioned for silence.

They reached a clearing. Calen scanned the area carefully. Taking a deep breath, he pulled a ladder out of the grass beside the trail, before he walked to the center of the clearing.

He scanned the edge of the clearing again. "Grab over there," he whispered as he reached for a tuft of grass.

A rawhide cover peeked out from under the beaten down grass. She grabbed hold and pulled with Calen. They uncovered a wooden entry on the ground in the middle of the clearing.

Calen lifted the entry, and peeked in. He motioned Zella forward. "It's okay, come into the light."

Zella stepped up to the entry and glanced in.

Several women in little more than rags, if that, shivered in the underground cold. A few had infants clinging to them, and naked children held on to the legs of others.

Zella glared at Calen. "We have to help them out," she whispered.

"Out of the pit, into death for us all, if we don't do it right. Those roamers may be back with water and food for them soon."

"Now." Dover lowered the ladder into the pit. "They'll throw food and water in. Let the mice have it."

The ladder hit bottom.

"Come ladies, hurry." Dover sat down and reached his hand into the pit.

Calen glanced around as the women scrambled up the ladder, some in obvious pain and discomfort. Most of the women and children looked as if they hadn't seen a decent meal in a season, or more.

The last one she could see stepped on the ladder. Zella steadied it. "Is that everyone?"

"A few dead people, they'll take them out later, maybe." A tear trickled down the cheek of a young woman, not yet gen two.

"Hurry," Dover said.

The girl ran after the other women and children.

Zella didn't recognize her, or any of these women. Maybe they hadn't eaten in so long they weren't recognizable.

She helped Dover pull the hide of grass back across the entry in the ground and carried the ladder back to its hiding place. Dover took the lead, and Zella followed behind.

Where they could go with these women in this condition, she had no idea. They were in no condition to be going anywhere. Most were barely walking skeletons. So pale, their skin would burn to a crisp in a march, if they could walk that far. As for food, there wasn't enough in Zella and Dover's gatherboards for more than one or two.

Dover led them through the clearing and into the tall Grass Sea, higher than their heads.

The women and children were so thin, the path completely closed up behind them.

Noises sounded behind them. The roamers might be back to toss food to the women. Well, they could use that food. Zella signaled to one woman who appeared healthier than the rest, and motioned the others on.

She strode back to a spot near where the group had come through. The other woman followed behind her. "Fran," she whispered.

Zella watched the clearing.

"I will." One of the men reached to pull the hide away from the pit.

"Let's throw it in. They eat off the ground." The other man held a small basket. "Besides, the sooner we return, the sooner we can eat. The bison won't last much longer."

Zella wondered where the food was for the women. The basket could hold enough food for one, maybe two people, not the dozen or so previously in the pit.

"Maybe we should eat their food, and then visit them." The first man leered at the second.

"Yuck. I don't want yesterday's leftovers. I saw the cook put moldy meat in there anyway."

"Hush, they might hear you." The stronger man pulled the hide away from the entry.

The other man stared into the Grass Sea.

"Bub, I see footprints." He looked up, almost directly at Zella. "I think we better go away from here."

The stronger man laughed. "You and your superstitions. You need to quit having those dreams. Besides, some of us came out here and danced around the women's pits last night. They cried while we sang and danced, and even cooked cow meat. Of course, we didn't share any with them. Come on now, pull."

The woman next to Zella trembled. Fran better not cry now.

Zella couldn't hear the other women, children, or Dover and Calen. Tracking them once this was over would be a challenge. "We have to kill them if they see us." She whispered and grabbed her spear.

Fran gritted her teeth and picked up a stone larger than her fist.

The stronger man reached for the wooden entry set in the ground.

The smaller man stood back, and scanned the perimeter of the clearing.

Zella jumped as something brushed her leg.

Naom stretched out against her, watching the men.

Naom could find Dover.

"Come and accept your offering." The stronger man held the entry up. He waited, and then turned to the other man. "I don't see anyone. Do you think they suffocated?" He laughed loudly.

Zella glanced at Fran, and motioned to Naom.

The smaller man took off running the way they had come.

Zella let him go. Naom would catch him. She ran forward and threw her spear into the back of the man who laughed and watched the smaller man run.

As he gurgled, Fran threw her rock into his head, then grabbed it, and beat what was left of his head to a mushy pulp.

Zella shuddered, and pulled her aside.

A yell echoed, and she turned her attention to the other man.

Naom had him on the ground, teeth at his throat.

Zella didn't want to kill him. He might be valuable. "Naom, hold him."

"Quickly," she said to Fran.

Fran trembled.

They dragged the dead man's body, and shoved it into the hole in the ground.

While he didn't deserve a burial, they had to hide the body. When other roamers arrived and stepped on his putrefying body,

they deserved the results. Hopefully, the Goddess would understand and not be angered that they had buried him. They slammed the wooden entry shut and pulled the hide over top.

She ran to the other man. Fran was close behind. "Leave be," she whispered, red faced and out of breath from exertion and hunger.

"Find food in my gatherboard." Zella pointed.

She turned to the man. "Why?"

"Don't kill me. I didn't want to. I don't like it. She can tell you."

"Why?" Zella signaled Naom to sit, guard, and stop growling.

"They said they would kill me if I didn't go along. I caught them when they captured my wife. Only they didn't know she was my wife. I try to sneak extra food to them all, including her."

Zella glanced at the woman beside her.

It was as much Dover's right to make the decision as hers. She reached into her gatherboard and pulled out a piece of rope. She motioned Naom backwards, and scanned the clearing. "Sit up. Your hands will be tied. If you try to escape, you will die."

He sat up, rubbed his arms, and put them behind his back so she could tie them. His arms were scratched from his fall. She tied them tight enough he couldn't pull them free, and loose enough he could walk easily. His head hung low as he waited.

"Your name?" What she had to do next was a greater disrespect to the man.

"Monrol," he whispered.

Fran nodded.

She pulled out a piece of cowhide and tied it carefully across his face. He could breathe, and maybe scream. It would be difficult for him to talk.

Zella motioned Fran to help her pick Monrol up.

Fran helped her steady the man.

"Now walk. Naom will lead us." She picked up her gatherboard and motioned Naom to find Dover.

The basket of rotting meat was left tilted over and spilled on the ground.

At the edge of clearing, she glanced back. No clear signs of a scuffle were visible. This man was small enough, other men might think it was simply a woman who had tried to escape and been tackled. Hopefully, they wouldn't be followed.

Naom led the way.

Zella and Fran helped Monrol along. They moved slow. Those

other women and children couldn't move fast either. It might not take long to catch up.

She nearly tripped over Naom lying flat in the grass.

Off to the right, most of the women sat, out of breath from their quick walk. At this rate, they would never make it anywhere safe. If there was such a place.

Dover and Calen were ahead, off to the left on the ground.

They must have reached another clearing.

Zella glanced at Fran, and motioned her to sit down. Then, she signaled Naom to watch them while she hurried forward to Calen and Dover.

## Chapter 27

Tanna's hopes fell. She had hoped Logan and Kol had found Zella and Dover. Jorn, she wasn't sure of. As her mother's brother, she should be sure he was on the same side and would protect her. Something the gen four grandmother had said nagged at her memory.

Jorn held his finger up to his lips and listened. "How many?" He whispered.

How many had been at the fire? "Maybe twenty or so scouts. And ten or so women, tied up."

He winced. "Okay. We have to rescue them, and find out where they are going. I heard the last of Blake's speech."

"Where are Zella and Dover?"

"Don't worry. We'll find them."

Relief flooded through her.

"Wait here. I'll be back." Jorn crawled off and out of sight.

Tanna waited and listened. Loud laughter at the fire pit startled her. She crawled back to Robin and whispered the exchange to him.

He said nothing.

She crept back into her spot to watch the group around the fire. It made her nauseous to watch and think what those poor women must have gone through.

As dangerous as Orid was, these roamers were far worse. Where had they come from? Why had Blake allowed them to do these things? He should have requested a council meeting when roamers appeared, not allowed them to do his dirty work. Rusty had said the bad men were part of Webbel, not Shells. These men weren't Webbels that she knew of.

Hopefully, Jorn could be trusted.

The early night stretched onward. Men cut up the roasted meat and ate almost all of it. They staggered to the tied women, and shoved the rawest pieces of meat into their mouths. They laughed and poured water down the women's throats as well.

Tanna knew what was about to happen and was afraid she would throw up.

A touch on her shoulder made her jump.

Jorn whispered. "Wait until they spread out. We have plenty of people ready. Sorry you have to see this."

She blinked and turned back to the fire pit.



Two roamers had grabbed each bound woman and dragged her off. Only Blake and the cook were not joining the roamers. Two men dragged a woman directly toward where she hid with Jorn, and Robin.

Jorn smiled.

Tanna shivered and gripped her spear.

Other roamers disappeared into the Grass Sea with barely struggling women.

Blake and the other man did not move. They leaned back against a huntboard.

Jorn held his hand up to Tanna and Robin to wait.

Two men dropped a tied woman, almost in Tanna's face.

One roamer came to the woman's head to hold her down.

Tanna's spear glinted in the moonlight.

A quick thrust, and that spear was through the roamer's body.

The other one tried to run.

Robin and Jorn's spear pierced his back.

The roamer's head crashed into the clearing. He fell face down. Two spears quivered in his back.

Other roamers screamed and fell through the clearing's edge with spears in their backs.

Tanna turned to the woman.

The woman pulled away, and glanced at Robin and Jorn.

"Safe." Tanna turned back to the clearing. Goddess Amber would understand these murders tonight. For the good of the community.

Blake and the other man stared at the spears in the backs of the dead roamers. They were used to screams as women fought the roamers attacking them. They weren't used to roamers falling back into the clearing with spears sticking out of their backs.

The two now stood back to back, their spears ready. They circled trying to figure out where the danger was. Catching Blake, without being hurt or killed, while he had a spear in hand, would be difficult.

Tanna almost smiled. Killing a person wouldn't be easy. Blake at least, was responsible for the deaths of many. Perhaps even Zella and Dover, as they were nowhere to be found. She fully intended to find out.

She parted the grasses and advanced with her spear in hand.

Blake saw her in the firelight and laughed. "A girl. Orid should have kept you here last fall."

She stepped closer, spear lifted high.

The laugh died.

Tanna didn't look back.

Logan and Kol growled, only a body length in front of her.

Blake had nowhere to go. He smiled. "Hello Robin. Glad to see you decided to join the fun. Surprised Tanna tolerates you after what you did to that little girl."

Her mind simmered at the memory of the ruse. Blake did not know the truth about Rusty.

"She and Zella both think they run the community." He laughed long and loud.

Robin let out a short laugh. "Yeah, I suppose so." He ignored her and walked in front of the dogs. He carried his spear lightly, at waist level.

She knew how fast he could set it.

"Why don't we sit and talk? You seemed to want to talk to your friend there." Robin held his hand out.

Blake looked at him, uncertainty clear as he hesitated. "Okay."

He sat down with his friend behind his back.

"Tanna, bring my gatherboard. I have some horse meat Blake might like."

She stared at him. Tanna knew better than to turn her back on Blake. Carefully, she stepped backwards out of the clearing.

Robin had a plan.

Now, if the horses were waiting, she knew what to do.

## Chapter 28

Zella slid to the ground beside Dover and Calen. "Monrol," she whispered.

"Trouble?" Dover said.

"Killed the other one." That one deserved to die. In fact, mice and rats were probably already feasting on his body, as well as the spoiled meat basket.

"I wasn't the only one who wanted to save them," Calen said. "Another pit here, we have to hurry. I know of at least one more pit, and if those roamers don't show back up, they will eventually be missed."

"We have to do something with all these sickly people." Zella said.

"Leave them here," Calen said. "If the roamers are having a celebration tonight we need to move fast. Then, gather them all together here, to hurry on to Shells. Their community isn't happy with Blake's ideas."

"I'm surprised they keep them so close," Dover said.

"They wouldn't if they could. The bad roamers fed them, almost enough to keep them alive, for their entertainment. Too far away, and it's too much trouble."

"I can't understand why Blake let this happen. Communities need as many women as possible. Let's hurry," Zella said.

The three stepped into the clearing, and hurried to the center.

Calen found the hide cover.

A pile of sticks tied together covered the entry. Dover pulled it aside. Sunlight streamed in. Shadowy forms cowered below, as if afraid of the sunlight. A rancid odor wafted out of the pit in the ground.

"Come," Zella said. "We need to quietly leave this grave." First one woman, then another, moved closer on hearing her voice.

Dover and Calen lifted the ladder down.

As each woman exited, Zella hugged her, and pointed her in the direction of the others huddled in the grass.

The last young woman stepped up the ladder.

"Any more?"

She shook her head and hurried in the direction Zella pointed.

Calen and Dover hid the ladder back where it had been, keeping in the tracks of others.

Zella closed the trap entry.

It took two people to pull the hide across the ground.

"You don't think anyone is left down there?"

Calen shook his head. "No. Not alive at least. The men never took the dead out."

They hurried back to the Grass Sea.

Dover walked to where all the women and children were gathered, quite as could be. Most looked as if they could barely move, and couldn't walk to a safe place.

"Calen, you are sure the next place is only a short walk away?"

Dover drank from his water gourd.

"For the three of us, yes. With them, it would take too long."

"Can we send them on towards where they need to go?"

"They'll need someone to lead them." Calen wiped sweat off his forehead.

Dover scanned the crowd. Most of these women were not from Webbel. His eyes rested on Monrol.

"Monrol, will you lead them to wherever Calen tells you too?"

Monrol couldn't speak with the cloth over his mouth, so he nodded.

"Calen, tell him where to go. Tell the women and children to walk, and then we will catch up with them. We will take Naom with us."

Zella made sure all the women had at least a sip of water. It was something at least. She didn't know how far they had to go.

The sun dipped toward the horizon of grass.

The women lined up quickly to walk single file. Monrol had Fran and another woman to steady him. While slow moving, the procession was safer than being in the ground, buried alive. The group toddled off.

Zella hoped the women could fend for themselves, and make it to where Calen sent them. These women's safety would determine the safety of their own villas

She and Naom followed Dover and Calen.

Unusual sounds off in the distance disturbed her. Her hands were clammy, and her heart raced. She stayed close to Dover and Calen.

Naom's ears perked, and twisted.

Calen signaled the third clearing.

She peered through the tall grass stems. Heat pumped through her body. No one was visible.

In this clearing, the hide had been pulled away from the pit. The ladder was in the open entryway, facing up to the sky.

They hadn't found Tanna. Her heart pounded as she stared and tried to figure out what had happened.

Dover touched her hand and whispered. "It could be dangerous. We have to check it."

Words failed her. Even a nod would bring on tears. Zella crept forward. Once close, she bent down on her knees and crawled to the opening, spear at the ready.

She couldn't see anything inside. The sun had sunk too low. They didn't dare light a fire. Webbels could be anywhere, behind them, as well as in the pit. The hide was nearby, on the ground. She pulled it over the opening, hoping it would cause anyone inside to cry out. No sound.

Dover came up beside her. "Let me go down." He pulled a piece of plastic out of his gatherboard. Occasionally it reflected light at night.

He kissed her forehead. Then he pushed the cover back open again and slipped down into the darkness.

None of them had gone into either of the other two pits. This one was darker, dingy, and smelled of bodily wastes. How roamers could even come to these places to rape women, she had no idea. Who could live in, or even visit, such revolting conditions?

A murmur broke the silence.

Dover spoke too low to recognize the words.

Then, the murmur again.

He was back up the ladder. "There is a woman down there. She wants to die and be buried there."

Dover pulled himself out of the pit. He sat, and stared ahead. "Honestly, I don't think I could save her, even if I had medicine. I think she knows that."

He turned away to hide his tears. The stench alone would have brought tears. He had to leave the woman to die. He couldn't save her.

That would hurt him.

"Pull the ladder and close the entry. Pull the hide back across," he whispered.

Zella stared at him.

"She begged for a quick ending. It's all I can do." He turned away. Tears glistened on his cheeks. "Please, don't make her suffer any longer."

Zella wanted to offer the woman hope. Without medicine, the woman would linger in pain. Even if she survived, the invisible wounds could fester. If she didn't want to live, she wouldn't anyway. Best to give the woman her dying wish.

"What is her name?" Zella asked.

"Pandy." Dover walked back across the clearing. He left Zella to do the unpleasant job of burying the woman, barely alive.

Tears on her cheeks, she leaned down and spoke into the pit. "Pandy, do you wish to die?"

A sob echoed. "Yes. Die soon anyway, blood too much."

Zella thought that maybe the tears had gotten to her. An odd way to phrase it. Everyone should talk the same. Unless the woman had a speech impediment.

Zella stepped onto the ladder. She descended into the dark, waste infested pit. She found the woman, and grasped her clammy hand.

"Pandy."

The woman squeezed Zella's hand. Her breath rattled in her throat.

She felt for a pulse.

Pandy breathed no longer.

Zella's tears fell thick and fast as she pulled the wooden entry shut.

This woman would suffer no longer.

Zella pulled the hide across the pit entry. Before she left, she pulled up a few clods of dirt and sprinkled them across the hide. "Let Pandy's spirit bring peace, and new hope grow where the old has died."

The dirt crumpled from her hands. To be buried alive, most would find that terrifying. Zella could almost feel the comfort she had given Pandy. Much like the womb, temperatures in the pits never changed. Darkness, silence outside of dreams, and hopes for a brighter future in another life. At least this woman knew where she would be buried. Even if her last days of life were horrid, her last breaths were peaceful. "Goddess Amber, please forgive me."

Dover and Calen spoke quietly together.

She tightened her hand on her spear, and quickly caught up with them. "We can't catch back up with Fran and Monrol now," Calen said.

"We have to. We said we would," Dover said.

"They expect us to arrive with the women that should be here."

Do you think we can escape with all of them, not knowing where Webbel is?"

Zella wasn't sure if she trusted Calen.

They couldn't abandon those women, and Monrol, in the Grass Sea. Those people were too weak.

Her daughter and Robin had not been in the first two pits. If they had been in the last pit, she needed to know. Those other people, the ones they had rescued, would have to fend for themselves.

"We can try to find them, I guess. Where do you think they are?" Dover asked.

Calen looked down at Naom. "Naom you have to find those women. I don't know if we can save them. We might have a better idea of what is going on. We've been away from Klapit a few days, and Blake wasn't telling me things long before that."

Zella motioned to Naom to find the trail. Not that it would be difficult. They probably took the main trail back to the hidden Webbel camp.

Naom ran back to the open pit. Her nose focused on finding the scent. She turned to the southwest, away from where they had come. Back toward the sounds they had heard earlier.

Zella raced through the grass with her spear ready. No need to hide their tracks on this trail. The Grass Sea gave a good cover, even though it could hide the roamers as well.

On they raced.

Screams sounded through the dusky evening air.

Her stomach fell as she put on a fresh burst of speed.

Naom paused in front of her, and she nearly tripped over her.

The body of a dead man, with two spears sticking out of his back was only a body length away. Gasping, and clutching her tunic, she backed up.

On the ground, a woman rubbed her wrists beside two women from Shims.

They held their finger to their lips.

Dover and Calen struggled up behind her.

"Tanna, bring my gatherboard. I have some horse meat Blake might like," Robin said.

They squatted down beside the women to listen. Creeping close, she peeked through the tall grass.

There was her daughter, backing away from Blake, and doing the bidding of a man, and her equal. That should never happen.

A woman never backed down from a man.

Robin sat on the ground in front of Blake.

She wanted to jump and run into the firelight.

The women held their arms out.

Dover grabbed Zella's arm and held her, finger to his lips.

Zella wanted to protect her daughter. She knew these women knew more about what was going on here than she did. They waited, quietly, calmly. Quan must be nearby.

She sat on her knees and waited.

"Tell me what your plan is," Robin said.



## Chapter 29

Blake laughed. "I won't tell you my plans. What did you do to my scouts?"

"Your scouts? Yes, I suppose they are yours. Orid thought they were his." Robin put his hands around his knees and leaned back.

"He did? He's too young to think that." Blake glanced around the clearing.

Tanna backed out of the clearing and hurried past Jorn. Robin wouldn't be able to talk long. She untied Sandy's rope.

Jorn helped her up onto the horse.

She held her head low so that Blake could not see her over the top of the grass.

Blake cackled again. "Well, I do need a healer, since there are none among the Webbels."

His laughter grated on Tanna's nerves.

Robin brought his arms together.

Tanna urged Sandy forward.

The other horse galloped in behind her.

Close to the fire, Sandy reared and pranced, hooves almost in Blake's face.

Blake dropped his spear.

So did the other man as he turned to the danger. The other man jumped up and stumbled backwards. He almost fell into the fire.

Robin grabbed Blake and threw a rope around his arms.

Tanna threw a rope around the neck of the unknown man. The one Tanna caught struggled.

Jorn arrived to help. Once the man was tied, much as the women had been, he no longer struggled.

Blake glared at her. "You keep secrets too."

"Not on purpose. Now, why have you allowed this to happen? You were nice when we were all children." Jorn stood over top of Blake.

"Nice? No. I never wanted to be nice. I am in control of my life."

"By taking control of other people's lives?" Tanna asked.

Sandy shifted away from the fire.

"No other way to control mine, if someone else might have the opportunity to control me."

"And, you controlling their lives is different how?" Tanna slid off the horse almost into Blake's face.

He sneered. "I'm in control, that's how."

"Blake, you always had control of your life. Maybe not how others treated you. No one has control of that," Robin said.

"Doesn't matter what I say. Anyway, you'll never do anything to me."

When Blake said that she remembered her mom. Zella could be anywhere.

Kol and Logan had disappeared before she returned for Sandy.

Blake could have even more people in the Grass Sea waiting to attack them.

Jorn, may or may not be trustworthy.

Some of those who hadn't staggered back out into the clearing might not be dead. They could be waiting to attack.

The ground began to tremble.

Tanna stumbled, and almost landed on Blake's legs. He stunk of spoiled food, dirt, and caked mud. She gasped as a plastic item fell on the ground next to him.

It rolled over and announced, "Morning Sunshine." The words sounded drawn out, almost watery.

She grabbed at it.

The waves of earth, and her stomach, subsided.

Bits of fire landed around her as she held the piece of plastic. It fit easily into her hand. Except the knob at the top. Like a knot on a tree, it stuck out. The plastic was not solid, so couldn't be melted and reused. Her fingers rubbed across a rough, brittle surface with lots of holes. It wouldn't make a good digging tool. The artifact wasn't big enough to carry anything on. What was it used for?

She touched the knob and moved it to the right carefully, so it wouldn't break off. Nothing happened. How it had spoken before? Tanna turned it over, and gently touched the other side. There were raised spots all over it, in neat orderly rows. She touched one and waited.

People crowded around her.

"You can't have that!" Blake shouted.

Tanna ignored him, and touched the knot at the top of the plastic again.

"That belongs to me. A thief has no rights," Blake said.

"Blake, if I were a thief, I would have grabbed it and hid it in my tunic. I am clearly looking at it, and would turn it over to the leaders, if they were here, for them to examine it. They know far more than I do about the ancestor's tools."

She grasped the plastic piece.

It squawked, "Time. Grumble, grumble. Man."

She stared at the artifact in her hands. It was cold, hard, and odd.

"Tanna!" Zella rushed to her and hugged her. "I've missed you so."

Tanna smiled as she waited for her mom to let go of her. Displays of affection like that were unusual.

As soon as Zella let go of her, Tanna held the talking artifact out toward her mom. "Blake had this, what is it?"

Her mother's hands trembled as they took the artifact.

Nearby, Dover checked the pulse of the man Tanna had tied up.

Tanna moved over, so Zella could be closer to the fire to see it.

She turned the artifact over, and over in her hands. "I don't know. I'll have to check some things later." Zella tucked the item in her gatherboard, safely out of Blake's reach.

"Jorn is here." Tanna said.

He had moved outside the firelight near the Grass Sea.

"I know. He will wait. I have a few new artifacts. I always compare them, and then give my reports. You will soon too, I hope."

Zella turned to Blake. "Where are Varl and Vira?"

Rumbling resounded as the ground beneath their feet shifted up and down.

"You have angered the Goddess Amber. You have caused the deaths of many people. The Mad Gods will punish you; and all of us!" Jorn strode up and grabbed Blake by the arm. "I should never have listened to a word you said! I trusted you had the right to lead."

"Enough fighting for now," Dover said. "We must try to stop the violence, and find a way to make the Goddess content again."

Jorn kicked Blake's hand. "The dead roamers must be moved from camp, so the hyenas don't attack us. Many decisions must be made. What to do with you is only one."

Jorn glared at Blake and then turned from the fire. "Zella, Dover, Marin, Irvin, we will discuss this now."

"Who will Webbel's representative be?" Blake sneered.

Jorn turned on his heel. "Until your trial, not you. No other Webbel representatives are here."

"Actually, Calen is here," Zella said.

He stared at his sister. "Fine."

Jorn relaxed his shoulders. "If you trust him, send him along." He stalked off to his gatherboard at the edge of the clearing.

"Is he okay?" The grandmother's words echoed in her memory.

"He was always different. Never was calm like our mom." Zella sighed and waved to Calen and Dover.

Robin reached for her hand. "We will join them."

"Robin, they are going to want to know what we did at the village," Tanna whispered as she shivered.

He bent over and kissed her forehead. "It will be fine. You did what you had to do."

She could only hope so. She felt as if she were walking to her own trial as she stepped into the circle waiting for her and Robin. Her fear must be similar to the fear Orid should have felt, and perhaps Fendon felt on that night not so long ago. The heat from the day had long since left the land, and her heart.

With Varl, Sharel, Vira, and Nala missing, it felt empty. As if half their community were gone. Only one representative was available from Webbel, Almond, and Tuttle. One might be all there was for quite a while.

Tanna stared at the ground. The leaders did not know her shame. She lifted her head up to everyone's stare. Heat rushed to her face, and she felt dizzy.

Robin reached for her hand.

Jorn glanced around the small group. "Okay, anyone can hear us. I have sent some of our men to help with digging a burial area. Others are guarding the women and children at the main camp. We all need updates."

"You must have come through after we did. It was empty when we came through," Robin said.

Jorn smiled. "We were right behind you. It was odd seeing two horses going through the grass together. They don't usually come near the camps. I knew Blake had said he was going to try to catch a few. I didn't know he had. I thought the horses were part of his group. We thought we had fight on our hands before we realized it was you."

"So you were hunting us, hunting the Webbels," Robin said.

Jorn nodded. "Can you blame me?"

Tanna remembered something the Grandmother had said. "How much do you know?"

Jorn glared at her, and then looked down at his hands. "Yes, I feel this is partly my fault. I gave Blake permission to find things. He felt he had found something important, and wanted to see if he could find more of them. I didn't know what they were. Those poor women.

I have no idea who they are." His shoulders heaved with dry, quiet sobs.

"Brother, you did nothing wrong. You have asked Dover and I both to look at things for a while to decide if there is anything to share with the community." Zella placed her hand on his shoulder.

"I hope Goddess Amber agrees with you," Jorn whispered.

"Tanna, Robin, can you tell us about your adventure?" Dover asked.

Tanna took a deep breath.

Dover had pulled the attention from Jorn to help him avoid losing face as a leader.

What Jorn would say when he knew what his niece had done?

"It was difficult. We didn't know what to expect. Uden hurt her ankle. We saw a lion kill a camel with a newborn, and it imprinted on Rusty. We took the baby camel back to Erin, and she gave us Betty for Uden to ride. Then, we made it to Almond."

Robin squeezed her hand.

She continued the tale as it had unfolded. The memory of Glenna's mother, and the fear Orid had provoked did not go unspoken. "I did what I felt I had to do. Robin didn't disagree. And the Goddess didn't punish us then." She pulled the horse statue from her tunic.

"See, it even looks like Sandy. The gen four grandmother wanted to keep her, and grandsponsor almost died. Maybe he is dead now," Tanna said.

Robin squeezed her arm. "She did a wonderful job. There will be food for the winter. Even if the harvests are late. She took care of the justice, and let the Goddess decide."

Jorn placed his palm across his face. "How bad?"

"Not bad," Tanna said. "Several people hurt, some women, well, we needn't talk about that. Orid and his followers, the Goddess gave them a just punishment within the allotted days."

Jorn's face contorted and his hands twisted from his mixed feelings.

He wasn't at fault. Maybe some of his decisions had allowed Blake and Orid to change, and become the danger they had. Dover and Zella had been able to discover the correct choice on their own.

"Blake always spoke to me in private," Jorn said. "I always thought it was because he was unsure, not that he was sure. How could I be so blind?"

"You were no blinder than I. I was dumb enough to stay at Klapit

for six seasons or more, I've lost count. No one even missed me in summer camp. I am sorry," Calen said.

Jorn turned to him. "Six seasons in one place? I'd forget everything, and everyone I knew."

Calen laughed. "Maybe that's what happened to Orid. As for me, I liked it. The peace and quiet were wonderful in between seasons. I would dig where, and when, Blake told me to."

"You never did talk much," Zella said.

"No, I don't like to. I asked Blake if you and Dover would stay as well, or Varl and Vira. He always said he had asked you, and to never bring it up again, or mention it to you." Calen twisted his hands. "I never thought he wasn't telling the truth. I am sorry."

"It sounds like our group had it the worst, expect maybe for Varl and Vira," Jorn said. "A Tuttle child was killed when Blake's roamer scouts attacked our group while we were hunting."

"We need to find Varl and Vira," Zella said.

"No," Calen said. Everyone turned to him. His face turned red.

"Okay." He held up his hands. "For you maybe. For me, it's to find those women from the pits and make sure they made it to the Shells community safe. I have to help these women from the third pit there as well."

"They remnants of Shell?" Tanna asked.

"You know about them?" Calen turned to her.

"Rusty and her baby brother are safe in Almond."

Calen smiled. "One less worry at least, as long as no roamer scouts are out that way. I have no idea how many there are. I'm not even sure Blake knows."

"Okay," Jorn said. "It sounds like we have a plan, maybe. Half make sure the lost people arrive at Shells, and half find Varl and Vira."

"We may need people at the winter camps too," Dover said.

"We can't split up again. We need to stay together," Zella said.

"I have an idea," Calen said. "Shells relocated camp should be on the way to Westpit. Blake probably had Varl and Vira sent to one, or the other. We should go to both anyway."

"Almond is unprotected," Zella said.

"No, Mom. Almond is as safe as we are. They have six hunters as well as Rusty. They are all together in Almond camp, and doing normal summer chores. We made the garden big enough for everyone. Though our gardener thought they could check on Lava's garden as well. There should be plenty of food."

"That isn't many," Jorn said. "A decision has to be made about Blake as well."

Marin and Irvin hadn't said anything other than to grunt approval or disapproval.

In fact, Tanna couldn't remember ever hearing of them joining in any debates. "How long to find the Shells camp?"

"We could be there in a few march's walk. It will take two days to reach Westpit," said Calen.

"How about we go as far as Shells before we decide. We need more information to make a final decision on Blake," Tanna said.

"Wise woman. Perhaps you should have been my daughter." Jorn watched her.

Tanna smiled. She couldn't lead both the group, and the digging operations. That wasn't allowed, for the real fear of becoming what Blake had become. It was nice to know he appreciated her. She could choose. Her Mom could train Rusty to follow her. It had been done before.

"So, a quick nap, then go to Shells at daylight?" Tanna asked.

"Everyone agree?"

No one disagreed.

She reached for Robin's hand and pulled him off to where they could have a screen of Grass Sea between them and everyone else.

## Chapter 30

Zella had been about to speak when Dover turned the conversation to Tanna. Tanna knew how to turn the attention away from Jorn when he most needed it. At the Almond villa, she had made a decision that affected the lives of everyone, and carried it through. Even here, when she could have given up that bit of power to Robin, she didn't. Thankfully, it didn't go to her head. Tanna asked if her ideas were best, and they were. She thought of her community, not only herself, as Blake and Orid had done.

"May she never fall into their trap." She settled down beside Dover for a nap.

"Don't think she will," Dover said. "She'll be a good leader. Question is; will she follow you, or Jorn?"

"She didn't train to follow Jorn."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

Zella wondered into dreamland thinking about the artifact Tanna had taken from Blake. Something about it was important. She couldn't quite remember what. Never mind, it would come when Goddess Amber was ready for her to know. Hopefully, they could appease her soon, preferably without more bloodshed.

A noise in camp woke her up. She sat up and wiped her eyes until they focused around her.

People talked, and packed for the trip to the Shells villa.

Surely, all the women in the pits were from Shells. She ought to speak to one to find out, maybe the woman with Monrol. Fran, that was her name.

The group gathered around the now cool fire pit.

Jorn held his hand up for silence. "If no one objects, we will follow Calen for now."

No one spoke aloud, though a few murmurs could be heard.

"Calen, you may lead, as you know best where we are going. Take Blake with you, and I will follow behind with his friend. Anyone who has trouble keeping up, please shout so we will hear you."

"With the horses, Tanna and I can ride ahead, and behind the group, to watch for stragglers." Robin hefted his gatherboard.

"Good idea," Jorn said. "Let's go then."

Calen didn't move until Zella gave him a gentle nudge. He turned red, picked up his huntboard, and walked off.

Blake tottered by his side with his hands tied in front of him, and



head down.

This walk through the Grass Sea was different than any Zella could remember. For one thing, she wasn't alone in front, or with only her daughter for company, and the sounds of the rest of her villa barely heard behind her.

Today, at the front of the line, she was surrounded by people. Conversations of the hunters constantly changed location and tone. It was more confusing than a Fall Trade meeting. Conversations, attention to the ground, sky, and avoiding stepping on someone, or in a prairie dog hole, overwhelmed an otherwise fascinating journey into the unknown.

Zella wondered how the women from the last pit fared. As light skinned as they were, they would burn easy in the sunlight. Maybe that was why Tanna wanted them to hurry in the early morning. The women should have walked through the night, if they had been able to recover safely. To be brought out of a tomb, then walk through unseen dangers might be more dangerous. Better to risk sunburn.

Tanna rode up on her horse and spoke to Calen.

Calen did not answer immediately.

Zella wasn't close enough to hear her.

Jorn hurried over; listened to their words, and held his hand up in the halt signal. "We should be about halfway there. Drink some water. Conditions at Shells will not be like our known villas."

Some of the people behind them murmured. The people wanted to hurry on. They were healthy. The rescued women had slipped through the row, and were no longer visible in the crowd.

Tanna rode up to her. "The women need to rest, one has a new baby."

"All the women with new babies are at the winter camps," Cherie from Tuttle said.

Tanna smiled at her. "Cherie, I know you did not see the rescued women last night. Several men and only a few women did. Ten women are following behind us. Many can barely walk. Perhaps, it would be nice if a few strong women and children helped them. They have no gatherboards, and couldn't carry one if they did right now."

The woman's face turned red. "No one told me."

"That's okay. Those women had a meal late last night. It was their first real meal in more than a season. If they hadn't been healthy long ago, they would all be dead now."

Tanna turned from the woman to Zella. "Mom, go ahead with

Calen and Dover."

"Is there anything I can do? Were they all from Shells?"

Tanna laughed, almost her carefree childish laugh.

Zella had missed it.

"Stay here, near the front of the group. Jorn may need you. No, I think they are from many places. I heard strange words from some, words I have never heard. I wonder what they were saying to each other."

Tanna smiled at her, and leaned over the horse's neck. The horse walked back down the line, now nearly two hundred people in length. She rode, almost as if she had ridden a horse all her life.

Robin arrived and spoke to Jorn and Calen.

The sun warmed the ground and dried the dew from the night before. During the next march, Zella noticed the pace had slowed some. Calen may have tried to slow for the women, and himself. They could walk for longer at a slower pace.

Jorn waited for her to catch up with him; allowing the few people between them to move ahead of him. "Calen says we are almost there. I can see smoke."

Zella hadn't noticed the smoke above the grass until he said something. Too old to lead if she missed that. If her vision was going, she would definitely no longer be allowed to lead the trade travels.

A scream from ahead shattered her thoughts.

Zella and Jorn ran.

Calen was on the ground, holding Blake down by the ankles as Blake tried to drag him along.

"That cry will bring my scouts. They can have you all." Blake's laughter was loud and clear.

"There are more of us than you realize Blake. By the way, the rest of your birth villa is with us." Jorn grabbed Blake and held him still.

"I don't care about them. If they don't fight with my scouts, the scouts can have them."

No one with so little regard for human life had lived in recent memory. Many ancestor's tales shared what could happen when such attitudes became common among the people. At least Jorn, and the rest of the council could make the decision the Goddess Amber required to keep peace in the community. Turning him loose to be a roamer wouldn't be safe.

The people of the villas hurried forward, crowding close. Many

had heard what Blake said. Women and small children were pushed to the center of the group. Women would fight, though not all cared to.

They waited, listening. The grasslands were unusually quiet. No wind, no grasses rustled. No lions roared. Only the column of smoke ahead, drifted on the breeze.

Robin and Tanna rode up on their horses.

"Go," Jorn said. "Look carefully, and quietly."

Tanna and Robin raced off in the direction of the smoke signals.

Zella grew restless waiting for Tanna and Robin to return. She paced with the hunters, spear ready for trouble from any direction.

Tanna rode back into the hastily made clearing, alone. She waved to Jorn.

Her pale face hid whatever she had seen.

Jorn hurried the hunters together, and pushed the Shims healers to the front of the line.

The horse trotted back to Zella.

"What did you see?"

The noise around her escalated as people hurried by.

"More later." Tanna waved as Sandy raced back toward the smoke.

Zella gasped as she ran to catch her daughter. She hadn't heard what had happened.

Dover ran beside her.

They left the villa group behind.

It was too far of a run for the smoke of a fire pit.

Soon, they reached a clearing.

Zella clapped her hand to her mouth as she surveyed the scene.

A few lodges nestled around the perimeter, mostly untouched. People, mostly men and a few gen four women, sat in front of them. Some cried. Some stared ahead blankly, as if they saw nothing.

Smoke rose from what was usually an open clearing in most villas, the main trade meeting place. Here however, had apparently been a treasury even larger than several villa's treasuries put together.

Now, it was a massive smoldering ruin. Bits of charred and smoldered wood crumpled around the edges. A few stones, now blackened, surrounded the burnt area. The column of smoke from the center floated off on a breeze high above the Grass Sea.

Zella glanced at all the people not moving, not noticing. She rushed forward wondering how this fire could have begun and ended

without igniting the Grass Sea.

Tanna and Robin were on the other side of the smoke column.

Zella peered inside the burned-out shell. Inside were the charred remains of typical villa belongings, looms, boxes, and more burnt to barely recognizable pieces. Odd spots nestled among the ashes. They didn't look right. Her mind raced as she tried to connect what she saw, with what she knew.

Flickering cinders burned all around her feet. The closest strange pile was out of reach. She couldn't place what it was. There was material, like cloth, maybe a pile of tunics and shawls.

She grabbed a stick, and poked the spot. Ashes fell down to reveal the arm bones and skull of a person, grinning hideously as it stared back at her. The lower jaw bone opened.

Zella shrank back in fear, right into Dover's arms.

The material, possibly a shawl, had covered the face as it burned.

Tanna came around the corner. "They trapped some of the roamers. They know where hot air is, and blew it into the lodge. Once the fire started, several of the women Blake's men had raped jumped in on top. They couldn't live after what had happened to them, their families, and their villa."

Zella reached for her.

"Mom, I have to stay here, and take care of the people who are left, don't I? This is my punishment. Goddess Amber shuddered last night, before they destroyed the building. She quaked until the fire engulfed them all." Tanna's tears streaked through dust and soot.

Zella held her close. She didn't know what the Goddess wanted or expected. If the Goddess was speaking to this villa, was she also speaking to rest of them, as they had gathered around the fire pit and found the item Blake had hid? She wondered if it was the Mad Gods wakening, or the Rio.

Jorn appeared beside her.

Zella comforted her daughter. She was after all, barely a gen two adult, and had made more mature decisions than was normal for a young woman her age. A release of emotions might be what she needed.

Jorn waited until the tears subsided. "Tanna. We will all rest here. The women who were in the last pit will remain here with Zella, Dover, and Calen. Calen isn't able to go further."

Tanna wiped her eyes and looked up at him. "Please."

Jorn reached to hold her chin. "Young woman, this isn't your

fault. I need you and Robin. With your help, and those horses, maybe we can prevent it from happening again. There is one more place we have to find, and fast."

"I'm not sure what I wanted. It wasn't this. Everything was so predictable. Now, it isn't. I hope Rusty and her brother are okay," Tanna sniffled.

"Did you ever name the child?" Zella asked.

"No." Tanna wiped her eyes.

"Perhaps we need to have a ceremony for the Goddess, beg for forgiveness, and name the child."

"I have to help Robin."

Zella sighed. Her daughter didn't want to be trail leader, which meant she wouldn't be a spiritual leader as well. Zella had never taught her some of the ceremonies. Maybe though, they were ready to change the ceremonies. She might be able to find and train someone else. Perhaps Rusty, or one of the orphans here.

Tanna walked away. She glanced through the incoming crowd and called villa members from all villas by name; directing them where to go, and what to do to help. No one complained, though she was half the age of most of the people she directed.

Jorn chuckled softly. "Zella, I think our world is changing again. People never stay the same long, do they? Maybe we have perfected our skills separately too long. Tanna is going to be an interesting leader. I'm going to help Quan set up a healing tent."

Jorn hurried off, leaving Zella to her thoughts. She had no interest in healing people. She preferred the spiritual leadership aspect. Or, maybe not even that. After all, she had rarely been called on for spiritual needs other than for birth or death. Coming of age events were usually held at Klapit. Quan led that event for everyone.

Her best option was to be sure the fire was completely out, and gather the bones. A long lonely task, one no one else would disturb her while doing.

# Chapter 31

Tanna rushed ahead on her horse with Robin by her side. A fire in the grass could be deadly, and they didn't know of any water to hide in near here. People could die.

They reached the clearing almost before they saw it. The horses didn't want to go further.

The scene before her was shocking.

A few people wondered around, as if lost.

Children huddled together and cried.

Men watched the smoldering remains in the center of the Grass Sea clearing.

She urged Sandy forward to one of the men. "What happened?"

Spears were thrust in their faces. "If you had been here sooner, you could have joined them. No other women have willingly been on a horse. Not one so young and pretty."

"We aren't part of Blake's scouts. Please. All of Shims, Lava, Almond, and Tuttle are behind us. They will be here soon."

Sandy shifted backwards from the spears.

One man grunted. "Do they have horses too?"

"No. These came to us when we allowed the Goddess to destroy Orid and his roamer friends."

Spears aimed at Tanna's face, lowered as the men almost relaxed.

"Robin is from Shims. They have medical knowledge. What can we do to help you?"

One man looked around the clearing and said, "Doesn't look like much, does it? We listened to their dreams. We thought we were doing what our Goddess wanted."

"Rusty said that," Tanna said.

"Rusty? You know Rusty?" The man closest to her head pointed the spear closer. "Where is she?"

"As safe as any of us. Rusty is in Almond villa. Leading the gen four adults, and new mothers," Tanna said.

The man stared at her.

"Rusty wanted us to find her family," Tanna said.

"We are what's left of it. The scouts are burned alive. And nearly all of the women jumped in as well. They couldn't live, knowing the pain Blake's scouts had given them. I wish there was some other way. They would not pass it on to their children."

Loss had shown in Rusty's eyes and shoulders. It had not given her the depth and magnitude of what had happened here. Even at the meeting, when Calen had spoken of what happened to the women kept captive in the pits, it had seemed unreal.

Here in this villa, with the burnt remains in the center, children cried, and men gazed about as if they had no idea who they were, where they were, or what do now.

Tanna had to give these people hope, something they could do. "Can you men bring water? We need to be sure the fire is out, and decide what the Goddess wants done with the bones of the dead. This reminder in the center of your villa will be difficult for all of you."

The men stared at her. "You want to help?"

"Yes," Tanna said. "I'll hurry the rest of our group here. Robin, you stay. Check on these people." She turned Sandy around and raced back to find Jorn and Calen.

Much work needed to be done. Her mom and Jorn would be here soon. She wanted to go on to Westpit, though she knew she should stay here. These people needed her.

So too did Rusty. She wanted even more to return to her, and be sure she was safe. Of course, Rusty was a day east of here. No going back. Or, any way to hear from her, if she needed help. She would need all the help of Goddess Amber. Surely, as many roamers as had died, there were few left to plague the remaining people.

Sandy reached Jorn and Calen.

"Hurry. Shells is burnt." Tanna raced to Zella.

She hurried to catch up to Robin so that they could discuss the correct ceremony. After all, nothing like this had ever happened before. This village, as well as each of their own villas, would require emotional, as well as physical healing. It would be a long road to recovery. Even the land had to recover.

Robin wrapped the burnt hand of child.

The little girl, with stringy hair, was dressed in rags, and covered in dirt. A whimper squeaked out as Robin tied the bandage. She wiped her tear-stained cheeks with a grimy hand, and looked up at Tanna, "Why did she have to die?"

Tanna's heart leapt. The child appeared only a little younger than Rusty.

"Come, child." Tanna squatted on the ground.

Robin hurried to his next patient.

"Tell me about your mom."

The girl sat on her lap, and turned her head to gaze up into Tanna's eyes. "She was so nice till the bad men came."

The little girl rubbed her eyes with clenched fists. "The men started the fire to burn the bad men. Mom jumped in. She screamed. At least, I think she did. There was much screaming. I tried to pull her out."

The little girl lifted her wrapped hand, as tears threatened to brim over.

Tanna snuggled her closer. "Dear child, it'll be okay. Your mom was in pain. Perhaps she felt she couldn't live with the pain."

She remembered something Robin had said about his own villa. "Was your mom a healer?"

The little girl nodded and snuggled closer to Tanna. "Why did she leave me behind? I have no other family." Tears slid down the child's cheeks, leaving clean trails through the soot.

Emotional pain could be worse than physical pain, simply because it went unnoticed. "What is your name?"

"Ambrena."

Tanna smiled and patted the child's back. "You will be fine."

"Scared of those men," the little girl said.

Tanna held the child. Comfort was what Ambrena needed right now, not words, or action. Those would come later. Tanna now had three orphans from this evil calamity to worry about. There must be many more. She hugged Ambrena close.

The man she had directed to go bring water earlier approached her with a gourd of water. He held out the gourd for the child.

Soon, Ambrena decided she had been held enough. She crawled out of Tanna's lap, and wondered off to where some other children played in the dirt.

Tanna watched her go, and wondered what would happen to all the orphans. Zella could take one, or maybe two. Dover had taken Robin in when his mother had died. That was different though, Dover had been Robin's sponsor. He had also been the only orphan.

Here, there were many. Some of the children might have a living mom, though she might not be able to care for herself, or her child. If the child was old enough, they would be able to help her. If not, they might be a burden. Some moms and children might reunite later, others never would.

Tanna found Robin again.



"I think I have all the visible wounds wrapped. Dover is taking care of the last few. Glad to help, and that we will be going soon."

"Robin, all these orphans, how many?"

He groaned and gazed around the community. "Too many. These people can't stay here. The reminder will be too much."

"They can't go home. They wouldn't be able to reestablish their homes and prepare for winter. They've been here too long. With no women, there will be no more children if they are sent away. And if they stay, Goddess Amber will be further angered."

Robin took her hand. "Their old homes were burned. That is why they were forced here. They thought Blake was offering them safety. He probably sent the roamers to burn their homes."

Tanna wasn't surprised. "Where is Blake now?"

"In the leader's home, tied up so much he can't move. I don't think he will escape again."

"They couldn't go back if they wanted to, could they?"

"There are too many orphans, and little contact with other people for generations. They need the contact now. It has almost been their ruin. Staying could be their only hope."

"Let's go then. We have a lot to prepare for the ceremony. I think it should be at dawn to symbolize a new beginning. Or maybe both. A death ceremony, and a re-birth ceremony."

Robin smiled at her.

The day passed as Tanna planned the ceremony. She wanted to work uninterrupted.

Zella came to see her, and left.

It was Tanna's responsibility.

The villas gathered as evening approached. Usually, in their villas, a bonfire, and evening meal was always in the center of the village. A place to gather, share reports of the day, plan for the next day, and tell tales.

No one knew exactly where to go, or what to do here.

Healing had to begin. Tanna jumped up and called the women who usually cooked on trips. Between two lodges was a large open area. She had no idea where this villa had cooked together in the past, or if they had.

As the food simmered, she called all the people together.

Jorn and Zella waited off to the side, Robin beside her.

She waited, standing as everyone around sat down.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Tonight is a night of mourning. We all mourn for many things. While for many, the sorrow

will last, tonight we all share in it. We must remember, grief is often invisible. Although someone appears happy, they may suffer inside."

She handed Robin a basket. "I will pass this basket around.

Everyone, even the youngest child, will add a clump of dirt. As you add it, say silently to yourself all the things you mourn tonight."

Tanna picked up her clump of dirt. As it slid between her fingers into the basket, she mourned her passing childhood, the peace she hadn't valued until it was gone, and the simple life they had all known, for the confusion they would now know. She held the basket while Robin added his dirt, meeting her eyes as it passed through his fingers.

Of course, many more baskets would be passed around. One would not be enough for the number of people gathered.

After what seemed a day, the baskets were gathered in front of Tanna along with a few gourds of water. A horse's pelvic bone platter was at her feet. She pulled out a handful of dirt from each basket and poured it on the platter with a little water. "I will combine the mourning of us all into new figurines to represent the joining of our sorrows. Please eat your meal while I do."

She, and a few others, turned to the task of creating clay figures. It wouldn't take long. They were not meant to be beautiful, as they were built as a memory of pain.

Zella watched what she was doing with an odd look on her face.

Tanna blushed. It should have been Uden's place to create the clay figurines. They had been close friends while Odalen had been alive, playing together with clay and colors. Maybe her sponsor had been a clay designer, though she didn't know who he was. She had never asked.

The people spoke little as they ate. They glanced at the small group making the figurines, calmer and quieter than she could remember any trade meeting every being. Even the dogs didn't run or bark.

Tanna's figure began to take shape, that of a bear. Odd. No group was known by the bear. No known group, that is. In fact, bears were only a distant memory, spoken of, and never seen alive by anyone in the five villas.

The bear, largest of the clay figures, stood first. A giant seashell represented Shells, a cube represented Lava, a spear represented Webbel, a pot represented Shims, a flute represented Almond, and a clay rope represented Tuttle.

Silence filled the clearing as Tanna stood with the figures at her

feet.

"Our ceremonial leader could not be here. We must find the missing dig leaders. Tonight, we will do what we can."

She held the clay flute for all to see. "A thing that should be of exquisite beauty."

Marin played an eerie tune on her flute.

"May your creation bring new life to our community. May you help us find Varl, Sharel, and the other missing people." She took the item and placed it in a bake box next to the fire.

Robin took the clay rope in his hands. "Vira and Nala are also missing among us. May they be found unharmed. May all of the damage done to the Tuttle family, here, and at winter camp, be undone." He placed the rope in the box as well.

Tanna took up the clay spear. "May the spear that pierced our side lose its power to bite. While we do not wish injury on those who harmed us, we will stand up to them. May this spear take all the pain the spear throwers have caused and send it to Goddess Amber with our dreams."

A tear slid down her cheek. She was almost afraid she was condemning people to no longer be able to use spears to hunt, or fend for themselves.

Robin took the clay pot in his hands and held it high. "May this pot, which can gather the power of lightning, gather all the pain in our villas, and in our land, allowing them to heal." He carefully placed the pot inside the box.

Tanna took the clay bear up and held it for all to see. "We have always had our individual villas, our individual lands, and individual knowledge. Though we have tried to share with those who wished to know as much as possible, perhaps we have not done enough. Perhaps, instead of being individual villas, alone, someone will look out for the whole community. This bear chose to form in my hands. For tonight, the bear guides and protects all us. May he send his voice to the Goddess to ask for her protection, and forgiveness."

Tanna placed the bear into the bake box.

Ambrena stepped beside her with a small piece of clay in her hands, and squished it as tight as she could. She dropped it in the box. Each child came up, grabbed a handful of dirt, mixed it in the water, and dropped it in the box.

Tanna hadn't asked them to participate. She couldn't tell them no. This was their ceremony, as much as hers. Tears streamed down many cheeks, as young adults, and then older adults, filed up

to the baskets to pull together some clay and drop it in. Some dropped in two, one for the missing, or dead.

As they settled back down, Tanna knew they expected something spectacular. She hoped they wouldn't be disappointed.

A few of the young men brought armfuls of charred bones to Tanna and sat them on the ground at her feet.

"As we burn these clay figures, let us also burn the bones of our enemies. We will send the smoke to the Goddess to ask for her protection." She gazed around the assembled people. "We also burn the bones of those who chose to die. They wished to speak directly to Goddess Amber in hopes of bringing peace and happiness back to their homelands. Let us grant their last request."

She placed bones in the box. A few had cloth scraps on them. The bones would burn hot. Hot enough to melt the clay. She hoped she remembered everything the gen four grandmother from Tuttle had told her about making clay pots. She had to do it right.

Tanna placed grass and wood inside the box and lit the fire. She waited until it burned to place the lid loosely on top. More fuel would be added throughout the night and upcoming days. She glanced around as the crowd watched her expectantly. "Marin, would you please choose someone to begin the tales for tonight?"

People seemed to accept that the initial part of the ceremony was over. However, they glanced at the bake box frequently throughout the early tales. More ceremony would come, once the travelers returned from Westpit.

## Chapter 32

Watching the ceremony instead of participating, even in the limited way she would if Jorn or Marin lead it, left Zella with a cold and distant feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her arms shivered. She sat as far from the fire pit as possible for a good view of Tanna's first conducted ceremony. From here, she could reach her quickly, if needed. Tanna had asked her a few questions, and consulted with Jorn and Marin before she began the ceremony.

Her daughter had created the ceremony all on her own. No similar ceremony had ever been held in living memory, or even in the recited tales that Zella could remember. She should know them all, though Calen had proven that at least Webbel knew of tales unknown to other villas.

Zella had raised her daughter to be a quiet, calm dig leader, much like herself. She could never stand up in front of this crowd and create a ceremony that had never been done before. She had trouble conducting a common ceremony in Lava villa. Without Jorn as her brother, she never would have succeeded.

"She knows what she is doing. I'm so glad," Marin said.

"I thought you would want to do it."

Marin laughed. "No, Zella. I am quiet, like you. I have to visit Shims for help before I face a crowd. Even the people we know. This crowd is almost half people we don't know. Our villas need someone with her skill and confidence. I hope it never goes into hiding."

Perhaps her shiny eyes at ceremonies should have given it away. She had been good at hiding her dislike of crowds.

Tanna placed the clay figures in the box. She moved easy, sure of herself, not halting. Even the child, Ambrena's unexpected addition, didn't startle her. Her daughter went along as if it were all planned.

Jorn touched her arm. "We should go in behind the crowd. You were once that confident Zella. She will be a great leader."

She turned to her brother. Yes, maybe she had been confident, before her son died. Confidence never returned after his death. "What leadership role will she fill? There isn't an open one."

"The Goddess has spoken," Marin said. They approached Tanna, last in line to make a clay finger cast. "We need a ruler for all the rulers to go to, as the villas will now spread out, to remain closer

together. The bear says it all. A mother bear protects her young."

Zella dropped her clay piece in the box and moved off with Marin and Jorn. "I don't want my daughter running between villas. She was raised to be a dig leader, not a runner. I want to keep her close. Tanna is all I have, and I am ready to stay at Lava villa more."

"We all are," Marin said. "We will see what the new way brings. It will keep some of the old, and some of the new, which may be older than we think."

People walked to their sleeping camp on the ground.

Dover found her and sat beside her.

"I'll have to wake early."

"I know. We all will."

Early the next morning, Zella rolled over to find Dover awake and gone already. With most of Shims villa here, they would tend to the sick. Even if it meant being away from Dover, she was glad to not have to help those hurt in the fire.

The fire pit glowed, illuminating Tanna squatted among the Shims medicinal vessels.

Zella walked over to her daughter.

"Tea?" Tanna stood over a container of simmering water.

Zella nodded.

"I am trying to be both what you want, and what I want. I want you to care for Rusty and Ambrena for me." Tanna handed her a gourd of warm tea.

"You aren't going to be away Tanna. We all need you. I need you."

"Mom you never finished grieving. I never could have replaced my brother. I never wanted to. I could never be what you wanted for him. I don't want to be on the outskirts of the village. I want to be on the inside, part of the daily events. Don't think I don't care. I do." Tanna reached out to her mom.

She didn't want her daughter to be someone she wasn't. Bravery had once been easy. It had to be, with Jorn to be taken care of while they were both too young to be an adult, and no one had any room in their lodges to take them in. "You can care for Ambrena and Rusty. You'll be there some." Zella fought to keep from crying.

Tanna smiled. "Some. Not for a while though. Robin and I may be busy. We have talked about living like the people from Shells and Mills. A couple lives together more than a summer meeting. It might be confusing to the girls if it doesn't work. And we need to be

together for the work we need to do to rebuild our community, now six villas strong."

Like the tale she and Dover had struggled to comprehend. Maybe people did live like that once, or maybe they were meant to. She was used to being independent. Adults lived singly until old now; they couldn't live together. Maybe the next gen could.

Jorn had once talked about fighting blood. And how, when it no longer flowed so strong, people could live in better harmony with each other. It couldn't be now, not with all the bloodshed of the last few battles. It wasn't over. Westpit waited to be found and rescued. And Blake to atone for his crimes, both the direct, and the indirect ones.

"At least through summer. We all have to figure out how this will affect us, all these new people. I have to be ready for this morning's ceremony." Tanna stood up and almost walked off before glancing back.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Zella sat her gourd down.

"Find Ambrena and have her ready when we start."

Zella finished her tea. People woke up and joined her. Normally, she would walk off by herself, or with Dover, out of people's way. Once she hadn't done that. Today, though, wasn't the day to try to listen to idle chatter. Her daughter would be calling the community together soon, and needed her help. She left her empty gourd by the fire, and strolled off in search of Ambrena.

Soon, most of the camp gathered around the fire pit for something warm to eat, and to prepare food for those going to Westpit.

Jorn stood up and waited on silence. "People of Shells and surrounding communities, this is not a good place for you to stay. Please prepare to join us in our winter homes. We will make room for you. You will have a few days to gather your things. As our group that goes forth today returns, we will stay one night, and then all return to our winter homes. There will be much to do."

He stepped aside.

Tanna stepped into view. "People of many communities, we must come together. As a person dies, their soul travels through bleakness before it finds the light. I go forth with the hunters today. When I return, our multitude of communities will be re-born together as one."

She gazed at the group as a whole. "For many gens, we have kept to ourselves. We have forced a style of dependence on

ourselves, and each other that is no longer needed. We will change. Perhaps, we may find that it is better to all live together and share in one community, rather than many smaller individual communities."

Tanna waved to Ambrena.

Ambrena pulled away from Zella's arms to stand beside Tanna.

"We have always had a role to grow into," Ambrena said.

"That won't change. You will simply have more choices, and opportunities to learn new things."

"Will skilled people leave our villas?" One woman asked.

A good question. Zella rubbed her hands. She wouldn't leave Lava, though others might.

"I don't think so. Everyone will be encouraged to choose a skill, and learn it well, with a general knowledge of other skills, much as we have now. Wouldn't it be nice for a rope maker to say to a toolmaker the size, shape, and weight of a tool they need? They need to know more of both skills in order to be able to do so." Tanna scanned the crowd, looking for questions.

A good answer. One she had asked when Odalen died and left Uden untrained. Without a clay designer, word tablets had become rare. The young children wouldn't learn the written language, and wouldn't be able to read the artifacts.

"I can learn more than one skill?" Ambrena said.

Tanna placed her hand on Ambrena's shoulder. "Yes. In fact, I hope everyone learns a little of multiple skills. We have a villa right now full of people who cannot make a knife to cut their meat, or a spear to hunt a deer. Some of the Webbel villa who can create cutting tools are here. Many have died. What tools and techniques have we lost forever because their apprentices did not learn them?" She lifted Ambrena's hand into the air.

"We have tried equality by each person having only one main skill and purpose in life. If that person becomes sick and dies, or is no longer able to work, we lose too much. If the gardener becomes sick, we have no food in winter. If the toolmaker is no longer there, we cannot hunt for food or furs. We must relearn to work together, and keep the knowledge more equally shared."

The crowd murmured.

"Who will watch the bone fires for me?"

Four young people from Almond stood up.

Her daughter had earned her fiery heart from somewhere. A share of that fire would be needed to survive the coming days.

"I want everyone to learn more about pottery from these young



adults. It is important in the rebirth of our community." Tanna turned to go.

One man from Shells hollered. "What about Blake?"

Tanna glanced at Jorn before turning back to the assembled people. "Goddess Amber has left that decision to the leaders who will remain while I am gone. We all agree on the evils this shell of a man has created?"

Tears stung Zella's eyes. So much wisdom in her now gen two daughter. Someone else must have been teaching her as well. A good thing. If Tanna had stayed in their lodge as much as Zella wanted, she'd be shier than Ambrena.

A few people cheered.

"Then let the decision be made by those left to care for this community. Too many decisions made by one person keep each of you from making your own."

"Shared power is always fairer," Jorn said. "Good luck!"

Tanna picked up her gatherboard.

It was the signal that the travelers were leaving for Westpit.

Ambrena ran crying up to Zella as they left. Almost all the men, and many of the women, had gone. A few stayed behind to help Shells prepare to leave.

Dover stood beside her.

Calen, with a gourd of tea in his hands, was nearby.

In the distance, Fran and Monrol stood apart from the rest of the group.

Zella took Ambrena's hand. She breathed deep and walked across the field to where Fran and Monrol were.

"Glad you all made it safely here," she said.

Monrol hid his face.

Fran prodded him. "No hiding. Tell."

Something was odd about Fran's word order.

"We're from far northeast. Many are." Fran glared at Monrol.

Fran took Zella's hand. "We saved Shells. Scouts attacked. Were going to burn the villa. Nothing to come back to."

She took a deep breath and slowed down. "Heard them talk. Waited til they raced into the villa. We attacked the scouts with rocks. Shells woke up and attacked back. Without all, none would have survived the night."

Ambrena's hand clutched Zella's tighter.

"We chased the scouts into the building. So many women chose to die. Tried to stop them," Monrol said.

Zella reached out her arm to the man. He, like everyone else here, was in a state of shock.

"There were other ways," Dover said.

"Other ways?"

"Monrol, among our people, and Shells, the women can't keep a child of a roamer attack. A child doesn't deserve to grow up despised like that. We have herbs that can prevent it. They can't cure the internal wounds though," Dover said.

"Not all such children turn out like Blake. Many women had children from roamers," Fran said. "Never want to give up my child."

"You came here without children," Zella said.

"Sickness came. Only daughter died. Few families left looking for a new place. Give up a child, unbelievable," Fran stepped back.

Zella reached out to her. "My son died, and he was wanted. I know the feelings that gave me. Imagine seeing the eyes of your attacker every day in your child's eyes. Or, reaching out to grab you with your attacker's tiny grubby hands. I could never give up a child. Would I be any different from Blake's mom if the situation was reversed? Perhaps we can find a better way. Farm them out far away, where the mother can never meet them."

"According to your laws," Monrol said, "Blake, who killed so many, should be dead, what do we do with him?"

Zella should know what to say. She had never been much of a spiritual leader, only going through the motions. There had been no need. "I'll ask Marin."

"Marin went with Jorn," Dover said. "We can't let the Goddess decide. I think she has given us the decision to make ourselves. We have two more days. Do we allow him to continue his reign of fear on the people, or do we protect our community? She is waiting to see if we have learned from our ancestors."

"They have seen enough evil and pain," Zella said. "We must free our people from it. Who among us can do so without becoming evil? Anyone who does so will feel they can crush any who oppose them the same way."

"Tanna left the decision to the Goddess," Dover said.

Zella didn't want to hear that. Could her daughter's mind be damaged now? She had changed so much. She didn't want to see Tanna become Blake, an enemy to the people. "Once, murderers such as Blake, were forced to roam, shunned with no home."

"He'll come back and attack. He'll find more roamers," Calen said.

She hadn't even realized he had walked up to the group.

Ambrena pulled her arm. "Feed him to Kafa."

Zella stared at the child.

"Kafa wouldn't eat him," Fran said. "Not sure we want Kafa to anyway, might make mean baby Kafa's."

Ambrena laughed.

"Who is Kafa?" Zella asked.

"Kafa is the Goddess of the lake. Fishermen in the lake north of here have to be careful of her," Fran said.

"I agree, I don't think we want any animal to eat his contaminated body. It should be burned." Zella glanced at the lodge Blake was in. She couldn't decide who, or how, he was to be killed.

She feared they were all following along with whichever person chose to take control, much as the Webbels had followed along with Blake. Almost too much trust in leaders, and not enough in themselves. She laughed. Giving up control to others was too easy. The Webbels had allowed Blake to take control, and never asked for help. That wouldn't happen here.

"Will all the Webbel villa members please come here now," Zella said loudly.

The women and children were noisy, and unable to sit still. Even a few young men had stayed.

"Ambrena, how long is the walk to the lake?"

"A little while, not long."

"Webbels, for your part in not contacting the other villas when Blake went out of control, you will suffer. First, you will go without water for the walk to the lake that Ambrena will lead us to."

They dropped their faces in shame, and toes scuffed in the dirt.

"You will carry Blake, your former leader. He will be placed on a pile of wood, and tied to where he cannot escape. Tonight, it will be burned."

With Dover's hand in one of hers, and Ambrena's in the other, she felt a strength she had forgotten.

"When the rest of your villa returns, you will choose a new leader. For now, Calen will lead you. You will work to prepare the bones for the bone burning as well as help the residents from Shells prepare to move."

"You have all suffered as well. This final act of suffering will be the last. You will repay your obligation to our collection of villas."

Zella turned from the assembled group. Now to bring Blake out, and find a way for these people to carry him. The Webbel villa would

do as they had been told. The water of the lake would seem a blessing after the dust of the Grass Sea, the burning of Shells treasury, and the fear of death.

## Chapter 33

Tanna led the group out of Shells burnt clearing and waited for Jorn and the men to catch up.

One tall muscular man looked around, through the crowd of people.

She walked over to him. "Hi."

He stared at her.

A young woman walked up and said brokenly, "New here, not know words."

How to ease his fears? Shells and Mills did have many words she had never heard.

The woman chattered to him in a birdsong speech.

"From?" If he spoke, his nervousness might calm, and he would better be able to assist them in their search for Westpit.

The man swept his hand across the Grass Sea. He pointed northwest, and waved his hands.

He must be from many days away. His cloak was too warm and overdressed for summer. The tunic under the cloak wasn't woven cloth. It was white fur. Tanna wanted to reach out and touch the fur. That would embarrass the man, at least it would if he had been from known villas. And it would be a signal of interest from her, since she was now the age to try to create a baby. Not today, and not with this man.

She smiled, and waved him on, as Jorn and a few of the men from Shells walked by.

An animal horn hung on a sling by his side. She tapped his shoulder and pointed at it.

He smiled, grabbed it, and blew into it.

The sound deafened her.

Everyone turned to stare at him. The man blushed, and placed the horn back at his side. He tapped his chest. "Adrian."

Tanna hurried to where everyone expected her, the front of the crowd. She was used to being in front, and preferred to be in front where the people could see her, not far ahead like her mom, because if something happened, no one would know. Or worse, if the group had to rest, they had to send a runner to find her.

Walking with the leaders, she would know what was going on in the group behind her. It would be a long day of walking. To walk further back in the group would be different, something she had

never done. Did they feel protected? Perhaps other people wished to be in front, leading the group. Or, were they happy following the leaders and enjoying conversations?

She decided to find out. Tanna slowed down and listened to conversations as people passed her.

A child had followed and struggled to keep up with her Almond mother. The child's mother was pregnant, and carried a heavy load.

She grasped the child's hand and listened in to the chatter as the mother smiled at her.

More conversations from behind them grabbed Tanna's attention.

"My looms would be full by now. My cloth isn't being made."

"If your cloth isn't made, I can't design new tunics, and my daughter has a coming of age next Spring Trade."

One gen three woman laughed. "Enjoy the walk both of you. You, Jesna, are seeing plenty of new patterns to weave into your cloth. And Prina, all the various patterns and new designs you are seeing will create new tunic plans for you. Relax and enjoy. You have all winter to design. It's going to be a long one."

"Well, most of what I am seeing is rags. Though I could imagine what they should look like," Jesna said.

Prina nodded.

The older woman smiled and turned to join another conversation.

Tanna let go of the child's hand and let a few more people pass her. The child glanced up at her, and then raced to catch up with her mother.

A group from Almond came next, telling tales, and talking about how to build drums and flutes. One young man from Almond had a thoughtful look on his face.

"What are you thinking?" Tanna asked.

The man glanced at her. "I want to see the man's horn. What is from? How was it made? Could I do that?"

Tanna smiled. "I'll introduce you tonight at camp. Careful of prairie dog holes."

He wondered off, hemmed in by the rest of the Almond villa. No wonder this group was never first or last in line. Everyone appreciated Almond's gifts. No one wanted to lose so valuable a community member who could be so lost in thought they forgot to see what was in front of their faces. Life would be dull without them.

The Shims group had their baskets out, and collected plants along the way. Medicine was something she wanted to know more

about.

They would appreciate being able to travel further and see more. They were seeing plants they didn't know, and asking each other what they were. Well, she could make their dream come true, for at least a few anyway.

A nagging thought interrupted her conscious. Where were the rest of the horses Blake had tamed?

Robin had stayed at camp with the horses to check on something before following the group. Where was Sandy?

Behind the Shims group were a few members of her villa. Several talked to the members of Shells who had come with them. She knew they were trying to learn their tales, and family ties to better fit them into the community. As the last people filed by, she glanced back.

Robin rode up with Sandy in tow.

"Sorry, my horse didn't want to come. I decided to grab a few pieces of the burnt building for firewood."

They rode all day, circling the walkers to be sure no one drifted off and was lost in the Grass Sea.

As evening approached, something peeked out over the tops of the Grass Sea. She signaled to Jorn.

Jorn waited with the group while she and Robin rode on ahead. They led the horses, who sniffed and tried to rear.

"Should we take them back to Jorn?" Robin whispered.

"We may need them," Tanna said.

They tied the horses to a gnarled stump.

Grass thinned ahead. They dropped to the ground and crawled a short distance.

Sharp jagged walls scattered across the landscape. Large pieces of gray rock were strewn across the ground. One piece rested flat on the ground, holding a fire pit. Several men and one woman on horseback with spears rode around the perimeter.

Rubble littered the open plain.

Talking and laughter almost too far away to distinguish echoed through the dusk.

Tanna and Robin hurried back to Jorn.

The horses waited.

Jorn had moved the group back. It would be a long cold night with no fire for warmth.

People munched travel cakes. They waited quietly, resting uneasily. Morning would bring a plan, another battle.

Tanna walked through the camp, helping Jorn choose who would watch for the roamers, and for how long. She peered up at the cloudless sky. Stars gave light, to both them, and the roamers in the clearing.



## Chapter 34

The Grass Sea quickly thinned in the direction Ambrena led Zella and Dover. If the lake the people of Shells spoke of was large enough, all the villas could fish here, and wouldn't have the long the trek to Footprint Lake for summer fishing. Perhaps the fish that swam here were different. The ancestors had kept this lake a secret for some reason. This lake could save their lives this summer at least.

Scrubby trees gave way to a sandy beach.

Members of Blake's Webbel villa carted their barely conscious passenger. He did not struggle in the simmering waves of heat.

Large and wide, the lake stretched in front of her. She couldn't see the other side. Calm, dark, and tiny waves rippled across the surface. The moist odor of worms, and rotting leaves drifted in the breeze. A peaceful place.

The group placed Blake's barely breathing body on the ground, and walked forward to the lake. They reached down with their hands to bring water up to their mouths.

Zella scanned the horizon. This treasure had remained hidden. Fish and the nearby woods should share plenty of food. Nutria, could be brought and raised here, as almost pets, like the sheep and cows. It should be prime habitat for them. Nutria stew with well-cooked fresh vegetables was what she needed.

Dover reached for her hand as the people stepped up and marveled at the lake. Large amounts of water always gave the people a special yearning. Once, their ancestors had sailed across water, though no one now knew how. The only reason why had to be adventure, or fighting. Leaving behind everything you knew wasn't something she wanted to do.

"This place should be home to someone. Shells have lived near here for a while. I wish we could stay here."

"Where are the people from Shells?" Dover asked.

They stood back from the water, glancing away, towards the brushy trees.

Zella wasn't sure if they were being respectful, and giving the newcomers a chance to see for themselves, or if something was wrong. She walked toward them.

"We haven't angered the Kafa Goddess, have we?"

One gen four man, who seemed to be leading them, said, "We

hope not. We don't know. We rarely go too close to the water."

"You don't fish here?" Zella's heart fluttered. Maybe the beauty was deceptive, and the dark water was more accurate. Of course, the heat of the day can make the water appear dark as well.

"Stay quiet, it's okay. The hungry Goddess grabs people. Over woods," he pointed to several trees. "She pulled a small child out of a tree."

That would not be a good way to die. Surely, this Goddess had her reasons.

One woman spoke up. "The boy was what you would call a rattler. While his mother grieved his death, I think she was relieved. She didn't want him to be like Orid or Blake. Trapper saw the child swallowed whole."

A sad relief for the mother. "What does the Goddess look like?"

Trapper leaned back, and looked at the sky. "Stays on the bottom of the lake, usually. When hungry, she searches among the shallows. A giant fish, similar to what some people eat. As long as a man and a child, she is. Goddess Kafa gulps her meal whole, and doesn't chew."

Zella shivered as if a chill wind blew. This place wasn't as peaceful as she had hoped. A water Goddess for a neighbor might not be good.

"Everyone, away from the lake," Dover said.

If only she could live here, in peace, away from the others, she would be safe enough. The Goddess would know when she could no longer care for herself. She wouldn't suffer long.

The group crowded around her and Dover, waiting to hear what they would say now.

Leading from a distance was easy. Leading from on top of the crowd was scary, and made breathing more difficult. Jorn could lead that way. So could Tanna. She opened her mouth.

A scream pierced the air.

Everyone turned to locate the sound.

Blake lay on the ground next to several downed trees, bound hand and foot, jerking as much as a bound man could.

Zella and Dover rushed over to him and stopped a few body lengths away.

His face wasn't red from screaming. It, and the rest of him, was covered with fiery ants. Tiny jaws gnawed him, forcing red welts up faster than she had ever seen before on anyone. He couldn't escape.

She glanced at Dover. Zella couldn't leave him like that.

They grabbed his hands and feet, and dragged his body, ants, and all, to the lake's edge. With all their strength, they picked him up, and threw him into the water.

They wiped the ants off their arms and legs and into the lake.

Blake's body, and the ants clinging to it, bobbed face down in the gloomy water.

He wouldn't have survived long anyway. The ant bite venom alone would have killed him. He may have deserved to die that way. Surely, the pain was no less than the pain many of his victims had suffered.

His screams burned into their memories, even as his body floated deeper into the lake.

Zella walked back from the water's edge. If it was over, peace would return to the community. She glanced back up at the people gathered around.

They were silent, watching her. Everyone knew what fiery ants looked like.

She walked to where his body had been.

The Webbel villa representatives had placed him down in a hurry. There was no easy to spot mound, though that might have disappeared, as they dragged his body off. Even in this sandy soil, loose dirt would be visible.

A few ants scurried about on the empty ground.

Zella gazed up at the crowd, and back at the lake.

As she did, a long glimmering glistening body emerged.

Blake's body bobbed on the surface, face down, visible red welts blistering in the sunshine.

The fish opened a cavernous mouth, and Blake's body, welts and all, disappeared inside. The Goddess Kafa had spoken. The ants had worked to bring a meal to her. She could be dangerous, engulfing anything she wanted, while also a judge beyond the people themselves.

People around her relaxed.

Trapper walked up to her. "He brought us to Klapit. Glad he is gone. We'd like to stay here. Nuts in the trees in the fall. A garden his scouts never found near here. Don't make us move again."

"Your homes, though. They are full of bad memories. Evil spirits will haunt you if you stay there. Don't you wish to go back to your old homes, or on with us?" Dover said.

"A few. Old home, only fish for food, few other animals came

there. Little grew there. Too warm in summer. Here, have variety." Trapper looked from Dover to Zella and back again. "Don't make us leave. Only home our children know."

The man and the rest of the rag tag group needed recovery, good food, and new tunics and shawls.

"How about you all come with us this fall, and winter in our villages?" Zella tried again.

They groaned.

She held up her hand.

"You all need good meals, new clothes, and safe sleep. There is safety in numbers. Your children need a chance to play with other children. I promise next spring, we will come back. Early if needed. Re-build your homes, in a different place. Maybe near where your gardens are, or nearer the lake."

Several of the survivors shook their heads.

"I promise we will do this. You all can learn the skills you don't have. We will all learn from you as well. This would be the perfect place for Spring and Fall Trades, and fishing, all in one place."

"Talk later." Trapper and the rest of the Shells people walked back down the trail to the burned village.

Dover squeezed her hand.

She glanced at him.

He smiled.

A new villa. A place to live together, instead of separate.

Maybe Goddess Amber would allow them to stay in one place now, if they wished. Maybe they had paid for their ancestor's crimes.

## Chapter 35

Tanna felt as if she hadn't slept all night.

She wasn't the only one.

They had awakened in the pre-dawn. There weren't enough people to fully surround the walls. Thankfully, there weren't enough roamer scouts to surround them either.

The plan was simple. As the scouts ate, the community would sneak up behind them, and tie them up. No one wanted to kill anyone. They would, if they had to.

The scouts in front of her watched the walls, not realizing danger waited behind them.

A wave of people on both sides crept forward. Only a few would rush forward to begin the attack.

Adrian blew his horn long and loud.

The scouts around the fire jumped and searched for the source of the bouncing echoes.

Tanna rushed forward.

Robin ran by her side.

They grabbed the two men in front of them. The men did not have time to react. Quickly, they tied their arms and legs. They shoved a piece of cloth in their mouths.

A few of the scouts had seen their attackers, and tried to escape. Their horses reared and snorted in fear, sending the scouts back toward the walls.

These scouts didn't need to suffer more than necessary until their full crimes had been determined. After all, these men weren't Orid, and no one knew what had convinced them to carry out his plans. She held her spear up over the two she and Robin had captured.

The men cowered.

She rolled the men over to be sure no prairie dog tunnels or fiery anthills were under them.

Threats and screams bounced off the broken walls.

Tanna hurried to where one man had managed to kick his way to freedom.

Her spear hurtled through the air, right through the man's colorful tunic as he tried to escape.

Robin caught up and passed her. He tackled the man, and shoved him to the ground.

Tanna grabbed the rope dangling from one leg.

The man tried to kick her.

She pulled the rope tight.

He slid backwards across a prairie dog hole. He kicked again.

She wrapped his feet tightly with the rope.

Robin jerked the man's arms behind his back and tied them.

The man jerked and tried to kick as he lay on the ground. Red blood from the spear wound smeared the bright colors of his tunic.

Those she had led gathered around her.

They left the scouts bound and tied on the ground.

Seven horses neighed and reared nearby. Some of the Webbel helpers ran forward to grab them by their lead ropes.

There might be more scouts watching. They might come to the rescue of these ten. Of course, that was expected.

Jorn, and the majority of the people with them, remained hidden in the Grass Sea. They would watch for more scouts.

Tanna motioned to have all the scouts brought to one spot. She would leave two or three people to guard them.

The bound men cursed and kicked trying to escape.

The last one brought over she recognized as Cealya, a woman from Webbel.

Tanna walked over to the woman and jabbed her with her toe. "Why?"

Cealya groaned.

"Robin, untie her feet. Help her up, and over there, away from the fire. Everyone else, stay here."

Robin glanced at Tanna. He turned to the woman and loosened her leg ties.

The woman could walk now, though Tanna could quickly pull the ankle ropes tight again with one hand.

Robin lifted Cealya slowly up, throwing another tie around her waist.

The woman walked forward with her head down.

Once out of hearing range of the scouts, Tanna turned to her.

Cealya motioned to the ground with her tied hands.

"You may sit on that rock," Tanna said.

Cealya sat down. "I can show you the way in."

Tanna sat in front of her, with Robin at her side. "Tell me."

The woman had tears in her eyes. They trickled down her cheek. Tied hands made it difficult to wipe them. "They took the man I wanted to be with. I had to keep an eye on him."

"What happened to him?"

"He died in there. A rock fell on him after the last heavy rain."

Cealya sat up as straight as she could. "I couldn't let my emotion show. At least I knew. I was allowed to feed them. Anxious families passed messages in and out through me. I couldn't leave. Too many women in there."

"How do we rescue them?"

"A few men worked on a secret way. A few escaped. Those who could. We can't let the numbers go down too quickly. It would be noticed by the dig leaders who stay in there. If only a few leave at once, they think they died." Cealya shuffled her feet.

"Only a few have left so far, the strongest. The others wouldn't be able to travel."

So, it wasn't over. There would be a fight inside as well.

"My brother too."

"Your brother?"

"A dig leader. I didn't want him too. He thought he could help from inside."

Robin's hand landed on her shoulder. He mouthed over Cealya's head, "Like Rusty."

A ruse was a good idea. Tanna tilted her head.

With his spear, he gently prodded Cealya up. After all, the dig leaders inside had heard the horn, and the scout's screams, and curses.

Cealya stumbled along the wall.

Tanna wondered if Cealya thought she was being led to her death. Of course, she could be leading them to an ambush.

She discreetly signaled Jorn to send reinforcements. They would creep through the edge of the Grass Sea, ready should they be needed. If, Jorn could be counted on. So far, he had been.

Cealya pointed to a high place in the jumbled mess. The highest point in the wall Tanna had seen. Tumbled rocks were tossed together as if a giant had played with pebbles.

Tanna followed her up to the wall.

Robin aimed his spear at Cealya's back.

This place had several smaller rocks, tumbled in front of the big ones. Tanna pointed at a rock, only waist high.

"Yes," Cealya whispered.

Tanna rolled the rock over. It wasn't as heavy as it appeared. Ragged children tumbled out. They hurried into the Grass Sea. Several frayed women followed, hiding their faces.

Behind them, staggered a few skeletal men. As one man passed, he whispered, "More. Hurry and save them."

Tanna gave the signal Jorn had told her to use.

"I'll keep her hands tied." Robin waved his spear toward Cealya.

"She's not all bad." The last man staggered after the others.

Seven people from Shims, and ten from Almond villa, crawled into the opening with their spears.

Tanna followed behind, spear at the ready.

Robin stayed behind to guard the tunnel.

At first, it was simply a tunnel lighted by tiny grease lamps. Barely enough light to make out the people in front of her.

An unrecognizable strong odor struck her nostrils.

The grey area lightened between the crawling legs of the man in front of her. Every movement forward, the stench worsened and became a multitude of mingled odors. Her stomach turned at the odor of body wastes layered in one corner. Flies buzzed and zipped over the rescuer's heads.

Rats scattered as they entered a tiny dark room, and were finally able to stand. Corpses were piled high along one wall. The unburied dead of the people held here against their will. Some of the dead were mostly bones, while flesh clung to other bodies. Rags were strewn around and piled in crevices.

They walked carefully and silently into the next room. It wasn't much better. Scraps of what had been blankets were strewn across the floor. Near the sunlit exit, were piles of bones, from what might have been rats and mice, the people had eaten. A few stones gathered in a corner.

One young woman's body lay on the ground.

The people who came in ahead of Tanna gathered around the body.

Tanna placed her hand on the woman's chest. Still breathing, barely. Blood seeped through the rags, and dried as she pulled her hand away. No sense of life stirred from the broken, bruised, and bloody girl. She lay there, awaiting death's beckoning tap on the shoulder.

Sunlight filtered in from the nearby entry, and caressed the battered body of the unknown young woman.

Anything, or anyone, could wait outside.

The rescuers beside her, and the captives outside waited on her.

Tanna crept to the entryway.

No plants, grass, or trees grew. They could not sneak into that



desolate landscape. All the rocks had been piled up to form walls, and this pitiful dying space.

Five large pits lined the ground, with piles of loose dirt covering any vegetation that might have grown.

Blake had been searching for something.

One wall had a stack of gleaming objects, perhaps pieces of metal for the people to use, leaned up against it. Another had plastic artifacts, some whole, and some broken pieces. There was a pile of what appeared to be decayed wood. The place was in obvious disarray. What could they have found, or thought they found here?

What she didn't see, was people. The rest of the scavengers, or the dig leaders, were not in sight. The pits had to be deep to hide them.

She stepped back into the room and near the dying woman. No hope for her to live, even if Dover had been there. Her soul needed to know others would survive.

A slight sound, not even a groan escaped her lips as the men peered at her.

Sorrow lined their faces. They all wanted to reach out to the girl. They knew she would not want to be touched. Her mother may have been one of those who had already escaped. She may already be dead. Or, perhaps she was in the pits, waiting even now to escape.

"Go in groups of three, one ahead, and two behind. We have to rescue them. The dig leaders may not look much better than the captives," Tanna whispered.

The group separated themselves.

She glanced down at the young woman.

The woman's lips moved, not a smile, only an acceptance.

A reassuring touch, much like a butterfly's wing, and Tanna turned away. Her hands clenched. This young woman's death would be punished. Goddess Amber gave them three days. When had she been injured? And who had hurt her?

She walked to the entryway, and two men followed behind her.

People stepped carefully into the sunshine. Even the noise of a bouncing pebble would echo between the walls. They fanned out around the broken stones.

Tanna waved them forward. Although she led, each group, and each individual, was on their own. The choices she had made affected only the beginning of the battle for Westpit. Something that belonged only in the ancestor's tales.

She had to fully trust each person to do their share, and not hurt

or kill needlessly. Tales of the ancestors flitted through her memory at top speed. A victory would never be hers alone. It would be a victory of them all. A leader never led without followers.

It wasn't so scary after all. She led herself, and others chose to follow. So why had people chosen to follow Blake and Orid? She couldn't think of that now.

An enormous pit loomed at her feet. To her left were roughly hewn steps of dirt, through the ancestral artifacts of generations past. Deep and smooth walls plunged nearly two people deep.

Three women huddled on the ground against the wall directly under her, watching in the opposite direction.

They appeared to be starved. Not the people who had hurt the young woman. These women had gourds, and small objects beside them. Sure enough, there was something covered up down there, or was it someone?

She held her hand up to the two men behind her.

With a motion of her hand, the men stepped back. Her foot touched the first step. She stepped down carefully.

The silent women gestured to her to go away.

The covered area in the pit moved. Slowly and rhythmically. A low growl and squeak seeped out.

Tanna crept closer.

She reached for the cover, unsure of what she would see.

The women against the wall shielded their eyes.

"Let that light in. Pull me out of here!"

The women cowered against the wall.

"Hoped." One woman dropped a gourd with odds and ends in it.

"They are bad. Made them go down this morning. Heard screams outside after we covered them." She held a metal piece in her hand.

"Don't hurt us," the third woman said.

Part of the pit floor was littered with debris. If these were the captives, let the dig leaders suffer. She would see them soon enough.

She held her spear out and pointed it toward the women, motioning them to the steps.

They stumbled up the steps into the arms of the two waiting men.

The ragged people came out of the pits and moved to the walls, near the cave. Waiting rescuers would guard them.

Tanna waved, and went back down. Now, to find out who the

person in the hole was. She pulled the cover off once again.

"There is nothing wrong with the machine!" The person, probably a male, breathed nosily. "Send the rope down!"

It was a wooden construction, similar to the system used for water in winter. A board with a rope across it led down with a large gourd on the rope. She couldn't figure out how to work it at first. When she did, the gourd plummeted.

It thunked.

"Hey what'd ya do that for!"

She waited.

"Now pull me up, and hurry you three!"

This man was way too bossy.

What would he do when he saw her? She had to pull him up to find out. Tanna pulled on the rope.

The top of the man's head appeared in the half-light of the hole. He looked down.

The rope stopped. He looked up. "Who are you?"

Tanna smiled. He sounded scared. Good. She didn't normally want to scare people. This person deserved to feel scared.

Footsteps shuffled behind her.

One of the Tuttle villa men descended the steps to help.

She handed him the rope.

The dig leader slid back down.

Beside her, the man from Tuttle pulled the rope, and the dig leader reached the top. A pale face showed above quivering arms. With help, he stepped carefully out of the gourd.

Tanna quickly tied his arms behind his back. "Now walk!" He glared at her and cursed under his breath.

She poked him with her spear.

He walked up the steps.

All of the people who had been sorting stuff in the pits huddled against one wall. Seven people from Shims were with them, checking for injuries.

Now Tanna had to decide what to do with these people.

It should be Jorn's place as leader. He was outside, and couldn't abandon his place out there.

She didn't want to follow the dig leaders down that tunnel, or fight them in the tunnel either. Her decision could be the final decision for these men. Tanna motioned the man to join the other dig leaders guarded by the men from Tuttle.

## Chapter 36

Lake ripples smoothed. The dark spot moved across the water.

Zella turned away. Like her daughter, she had allowed the Goddess to decide. Her own place in Shells, and the place of this new Goddess, remained to be recognized. Perhaps she rarely heard Goddess Amber speak, because she was listening for Goddess Kafa and didn't know her. The surviving remnants of Shells would teach her about the Kafa Goddess.

The group from Shells led the way back to their partially burnt village. Few spoken words could be heard. No breeze rustled the new leaves. Even the children were quiet, and held an adult's hand.

Zella and Dover followed behind, so no stragglers would be lost.

Ambrena trudged in front of them. Her energy no longer vibrated through her limbs.

The burned-out center remained. A smoldering memory of the pain and loss. Several people stiffened as the Grass Sea opened to the cleaning.

Dover was right. This was no place to live. Not now, not ever with their memories. Someday, the Goddess may deem it safe again.

The two young women who guarded the box of burning bones for the figurines waited on them. Clay making was a grueling process using normal burning materials. Burning bones had to drain them emotionally, as well as physically.

"Do you want to see the garden?" Ambrena asked.

"How did you manage to keep the garden a secret?"

The gardener grinned. "Easy. Someone had to be too old to work in the pits, and to look after the children. Blake didn't want his scouts near the children, or me. I kept them safe, and learning. Follow me."

They walked single file down what appeared to be a dog trail.

The gardener waved at the Grass Sea. "Apparently he had no idea. We found this little clearing, and we planted."

"Blake didn't question. Weren't allowed to hunt our own food. Little grew where we came from. He thought we only fished," Trapper said.

"I grew up in Mills. I knew much the people from Shells didn't know. Here is my handiwork." The gardener parted the grasses.

Circles and circles of vegetables crowded the clearing, reaching for the sun's life giving rays.

Plenty of food for all of the people of Shells, and some to share if

need be. Perhaps, Blake knew and intended to steal it later, after all the hard work was completed. They would never know.

She walked through the small circular patches. Early corn grew in one circle. Beans crept up their stalks. Squash plants peeked through the dirt nearby. Several circles of green vegetables, many she couldn't name by first growth leaves.

Not far away were scrub trees. There must have been more water here once. A few scrubby tree skirts were littered with pecans and walnuts.

This would be a wonderful place to live, if only they could set up homes this summer.

The gardener watched, and waited.

Zella walked up to the trees. Not far beyond, was a line in the ground. It was a smooth surface with grass and small plants, nothing tall grew nearby. She walked on.

Ambrena reached up for her hand.

"What lies beyond here?" Zella asked.

The child smiled, danced, and pulled her along. Once they crossed the more level place, she ran to a recently disturbed area.

Zella hurried to catch up. Surely, they didn't bury their dead here. Digging tools, some of metal, were near the disturbed area. Excited, she grabbed one, and gazed into the hole in the ground.

Right at the surface was a piece of plastic, which was being carefully excavated. Beside it, another piece of metal, and crumbled bits of paper.

"I found it!" Ambrena yelled. "We have tools now."

Zella smiled and hugged the child. "What have you found?"

"This." She pointed at the pieces in the tiny pit. "Over there, we hid other things. We don't know what they are."

An old book was under the cover, something she wished she could add to her collection. A few plastic artifact gourds peeked out underneath it. They were something anyone could use, once checked well for trace dangers. There was a good bit of small plastic and several metal pieces that could be heated and reformed.

The gardener sat beside her. "What would you do with the paper?"

"I wish I could keep it, and compare it to the pieces I have carried since Dover, Calen, and I went north. Please, may I keep it until Tanna comes back?"

The woman smiled. "I can see you are a good person. It is safe to share our secrets with you. You may keep it until your villas come

back, or we hear they won't be back."

The digging area could easily expand. A bison hide covered several parts of the ground with a living layer of grass, much like the pits the women had been hid in. The hide would fall apart. It worked though, if Blake or his roamer scouts came near, they would never notice. The gardener pulled several hide covers back. They had worked as much here as in the garden.

"We are close to Lake Kafa here. About half the distance we walked with Blake. We need to go." The gardener stood up and walked back to the brushy area.

Ambrena danced along behind her.

Zella followed her back to the burnt clearing.

Goddess Amber didn't allow them to build directly on these mounds of the ancients; perhaps they could build homes near the garden area. It wasn't far from the lake, not even a quarter of a march walk, and the group here could mine any season. Maybe some could be sent to where Tanna was now, to live when the groups became too big.

In fact, with all the extra people in the villas, they could plan a new settlement. Another one at the place in the north she had found with Calen and Dover. There might be enough adults by then. Surely, the Goddess would understand and not punish them for their villas being too large until they could make a change. The many orphan children deserved a chance to stay with the adults they knew until the recovery began.

"Do you see why we want to stay?" Trapper asked.

"We cannot move your homes this summer. The garden isn't ready now." She wanted them to be able to stay.

Trapper grinned. "With enough healthy adults, our lodgings move quickly. They are made to come apart and put together easy. Great for fishing."

Zella fingered the hide. Perhaps they could. A rush of memory, and eyes overwhelmed her. Where were the two men they had seen in the dig lodge? She hadn't seen them since their return. Only Calen knew where Blake hid them. The day was half over. The men might have been without food or water for two days.

"Calen, are there any more roamers?"

He didn't answer.

"Trapper, where would you like to have your homes rebuilt?" Dover asked.

"Maybe you can help us pick out a place." Trapper glanced from

Zella to Dover and back again. "What's wrong?"

"I realized some of Blake's captives haven't been accounted for. We have to go find them. Only Calen would know where they might be. And he is in no condition to march quickly and be able to find them."

A woman younger than Tanna walked up. "I may know. Blake liked my company for some reason, no other woman. He never hurt me, though he yelled occasionally. I'm Yola."

No one knew if any roamers were around. Anything could happen. Dover needed to stay and help. The rest of the villas could help him when they returned. She motioned to Yola.

Dover kissed Zella's forehead. "I'll be here. We have a lot to do. I think in three, or four days, we can have the camp moved and settled. Maybe even a new food storage pit dug."

Yola returned with water gourds and some food.

Zella took one gourd of water and turned to hurry back in the direction of Klapit. She knew the general direction.

Yola knew it better. She led at almost double march speed, not slowing down for startled rabbits or slithering snakes.

Spear at the ready, Zella followed behind.

Webbel camp appeared on the horizon.

"Together, or separate," Zella whispered as they panted outside the circle, hidden in the grass. She took a sip of water and waited.

Yola looked at her wide-eyed. "Together is safer."

Six small straw and wood lodges nestled in the clearing. Straw was easy to find, wood less so.

The first lodge wasn't far away. Animals had dug in the dirt floor, leaving footprints behind. No food or clothing scraps were visible in the low light.

The second contained a few chickens hiding from the late afternoon sun.

Each empty lodge waited for the occupants return.

The sun floated down the horizon.

They had to find the men. The combination of day heat and night cold could kill.

"We have to check the Klapit dig lodge."

Roamers could trap them in there, and then they would be no better off than the men.

A thick line of the Grass Sea blocked the hidden Webbel villa from Klapit.

Klapit appeared abandoned. No one was visible. Hiding places

abounded. They walked cautiously, and quickly, across to the dig lodge.

Zella motioned to Yola to stay. She listened at the entry. No sounds. The entry opened easily at her touch.

Yola waited at the edge of the lodge, watching all around.

Zella hefted her spear and walked into the dark interior.

The light from the open windsun lit the room enough to see the dirt covered hide, like the pit covers where the women were held. An eerie gloom settled over the odor of the dig lodge. An odor that didn't belong.

It didn't take much strength to pull the cover back.

When she lifted the entry in the ground, she had no idea what to expect.



## Chapter 37

Tanna faced the group of dig leaders. She had witnessed the starvation, the fear, and the pain of the captives, and the dying young woman. According to the Goddess Amber's laws, these dig leaders did not deserve to live.

The dig leaders didn't look much better, if any, than their captives. Hungry, Cealya had said.

Perhaps they had agreed to go along at first, not realizing Blake's intent. Maybe, like Calen they hoped to help the people, or prevent worse things from happening to them. Or, like Monrol and Cealya, some of these captives were their family and friends, and Blake must never know.

The Tuttle and Shims members who came in with her, some known, and some unknown, waited on her decision. People listened to her. The decision had to be fair and equally shared. This was not the place to sit and openly discuss what to do. There were too many roamers and dig leaders, and too many unknowns. Shells, and her mother, needed them to hurry and return.

Tanna did not want to be responsible for the lives and deaths of these people. If she decided wrong, the Goddess could send another attack of the Mad Gods, damaging their winter homes, or killing people here.

One of the dig leaders stepped forward. "There is another way out. The way we originally came in. They kept it blocked with rock."

Tanna grunted at him.

He pointed the way.

A crash on the other side of the nearest wall startled her. Dust floated in the air as the wall quivered.

Everyone around her backed away from the wall.

The wall wobbled.

The men grabbed the dig leaders and dashed across the ground between the pits to the other side.

One dig leader whispered, "Our cave is back here. Let's go in."

Tanna took the man in. Two Tuttle men followed behind.

Light filtered in through a hole in the ceiling. That would allow rain in as well. She followed him to the back, where there was an opening in the side of the wall. Cealya peered in through the opening.

She smiled when she saw them. "No food Dale. Freedom."

"You told them where the entry used to be."

"I never thought they'd lock you in. They made you a captive too."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad. They put up more stones, and then killed the men who placed them. I have no idea what they intended to do, or how they planned to bring out what they wanted, whenever it was found."

Pounding echoed, as people tried to push the stones apart.

The thought of starving in this hole sent shivers down her back. Whatever Blake wanted was so important he would kill for it. And kill those who helped him find it.

"How did you feed the people?"

"Through this little hole," Cealya said. "We could pass a handful each day. Only enough to feed a few people, not the thirty or so stuck here."

"What about the other exit?"

"That's why we made it. Once the people looked starved, I could sneak in more food. They were stronger. Soon, they might have been strong enough to escape. They were preparing."

Cealya glanced behind her. "I heard the scouts last night say something was wrong. The Goddess couldn't be happy, or she wouldn't let the Mad Gods loose. Blake should have been here yesterday. The scouts were worried. I passed the information on to my brother."

Tanna turned to him. "So the whole thing was staged?"

"Not really. Most of the other dig leaders wanted out, same as I did. Some of the men wouldn't give up having women at their beck and call. They were roamers. One or two aren't too dangerous." Dale shuffled his feet.

He shuddered. "Being the group leader, I decided to play along last night. I said I needed to choose one of the women for myself, and wanted the other men to wait in here."

Dale smiled. "I told the women my plan, quickly and quietly. I had no idea what the other dig leaders would do. They were desperate for one last night before they starved to death. They didn't know. I didn't tell them the others were going to escape today. What they did to that young woman." Dale sobbed.

Tanna rested her hands on his shoulder.

He was speaking the truth.

The sound of the stone wall being pounded in the background faded, and became clearer again.

Desperate men had done great evil.

Maybe it was the separation of adults, male and female, which had led in part to the problem. Once, the Goddess Amber had declared that men and women should live apart, to heal from the wounds of generations past. The wounds were re-opening now because they lived apart, instead of together.

Tanna turned to the men behind her. "There has to be another way out. Blake blocked that entrance. He had no intention of using it again. He knew these desperate men would try to tear it down from the inside."

Sunlight streamed through the hole in the roof. "I'm going up there. Lift me up."

One of the Tuttle men sat his spear down.

Tanna climbed on his shoulders. These rock walls looked like a tumbled mess of pebbles to her. There had to be a way. She climbed through the hole, and stepped onto the upper surface.

Pounding continued behind her while she gazed over the rocks all around her. Drawing with her finger in the air, she guessed the way they would tumble, if knocked a certain way. A chill swept over her as she realized the answer. The dig leaders would have their cave tumbled down on them for Blake to enter.

Tanna carefully walked to the edge. She peeked down at Cealya.

"Cealya, go to the men who are trying to break in. Bring them around here. That tunnel is too small in the other cave to use."

She stepped back to the hole in the roof. "Dale, all of you, gather the people inside, and go to the opposite wall from the captive's cave. Be careful!"

Tanna watched them leave. She hoped she was right.

Before long, the pounding stopped. Jorn appeared around the wall, followed by several men with rocks as big as they could carry. She hoped she could convey what she knew about how to break down these walls. Eventually, they must all come down. The Goddess could do it herself. Or, maybe she expected her people to stand up and do it without her help.

"Jorn, wait until I am safely down. Push this rock to the right," she pointed at one.

"And that one to the left." She pointed at the one beside it. "They should fold down. The cave I am standing on will be gone. There must be more secrets hidden in this place."

"Varl, Sharel, Vira, and Nala weren't with the people. They don't

remember the names."

"We will find them. If we have to question every roamer, we will find them." Tanna scurried back to the hole in the roof. The leap down wouldn't be easy. She eyed it carefully.

There was Robin, ready to catch her.

She dropped down gently into his arms.

He sat her carefully down, and dusted her hair out of her eyes. A quick kiss on her cheek, and he grabbed her hand, dragging her away to safety.

The paleness of his face told her he had seen the young woman, and there had been nothing he could do to save her.

They reached the waiting crowd. Dig leaders were backed up to the walls, hands tied. The rescuers had spears at the ready, watching them closely. Dale was in the middle of the group, sharing the same fate as the others.

Tanna turned to watch as Jorn did his best to follow her instructions. A childhood of building twig lodges and visions from dreams mattered now. Did she guess right? She had no idea how deep those stones might be buried. The stones looked like jagged teeth reaching for the sky. Hopefully, those two teeth were loose enough to be pulled from their earthen jaws.

After many hits, the stones began to sway. Dust swirled. The great slabs angled sideways and forward, into the large pit, pushing the roof balance towards the center pit.

The earth groaned as the rocks hit, and waves of sound and movement cascaded around the circle. One by one, the rocks shivered, crumbled, and fell, mostly onto the ones beside them.

Tanna urged the people to the center pit.

Pit holes and rocks littered the ground. Dust blossomed up into the air.

She couldn't see anyone, or anything. Choking and coughing, she reached for whatever she could find to hold onto and steady herself.

Screams echoed in the confused area. Locations, sounds, and sight weren't solid. They flowed around her body.

Dust settled slowly. Devastation was visible, up close, an arm's length, and at last, most of the clearing. Most of the giant stones were now on the ground.

In several places, arms or legs stuck out from under stones. The injured and dying groaned.

Even if the Goddess had been willing to give them another

chance, none of the bound men stood.

All those who had entered for the rescue were standing or sitting. They had cuts and bruises. They would live to walk out of here. One groan grabbed her attention. It was close by.

She followed it and saw Dale's hand. She could see all of him, except his right foot. It was trapped under a large stone.

Robin rushed to him. Two men and Robin pushed and pulled to move the rock off Dale's foot. His lower leg was badly broken. Dale would heal, if Robin could mend it. He might never walk again.

Cealya dashed through the rubble; screaming for Dale.

"He's over here, Cealya," Tanna said.

Cealya passed her with a worried smile as she ran to her brother and hugged him.

This ordeal had been horrible on them both.

A few groaned on the blood-soaked ground. One waved to her.

"I want to die. I can't live with the memories of what I saw. I didn't do it. I really didn't."

Tanna took his hand.

The man's face turned from pale to pasty. Death had taken his spirit away. His hand turned cold in hers.

At first, she saw no visible wounds, no damage. Then, as she let go of his hand, she realized his other arm was broken. He could have healed from that, and led an active life.

Some wounds could never heal. Some scars couldn't be seen. Who knew what lay inside, within his mind. Giving up was often the beginning of the end, even in a healthy person. Perhaps, he needed to let the damage go. He couldn't let it continue.

Tanna's tears fell on the dead man's hand. She didn't know his name, or where he was from. Perhaps his sacrifice would bring peace.

She glanced up.

Robin waited.

"He didn't have to die. He chose to," Tanna said.

Robin reached out to her. "The captive's cave, it is standing. The Goddess buried most of the dig leaders and roamers. We have to bury the others."

"Does the young woman live?"

"We will find out," Robin said.

Tanna and Robin worked their way across the desolation, through the broken rocks and the swirling dust clouds to the other cave. Entering it, they reached a gloomy space. A strand of sunlight

peeked through the cloud of dust. Tanna followed it to the young woman.

Beside her was a weeping woman. "They promised they wouldn't hurt her. They promised," she sobbed.

Tanna touched her shoulder.

"I would never have come here to help, if I had known they would hurt her." Her eyes pleaded with Tanna.

Robin reached for the young woman's hand. "She suffers no more. She will come back. As a new child, perhaps, in a better place."

The woman cried, and then dried her eyes. "We must bury her, and not near those who hurt her."

"All of the remains of the dead must be buried. The roamers and dig leaders have taken responsibility for what they've done."

The woman held her hand to her mouth and looked away.

Robin picked up the young woman's body, as others straggled into the stinking chamber.

This ground was bad. What had happened here was so awful, that even if good, useful items had been found, they must never use them until the memory was washed away from the land beneath their feet.

The bodies and the bones of the dead were carried outside, across the tumbled rocks.

Tanna went to see where the roamers had been left. She couldn't find them at first.

A woman approached her.

"Did they escape?" Tanna asked.

The woman pointed.

One solid block had fallen backwards. The one the men had been working to loosen from this side. The roamers were buried. There was no saving them. She walked over to the stone. It had cracked, and not broken. Blood seeped out from the edges. A foot stuck out a body length away.

The Goddess had decided. Now, it was up to Tanna, and the community, to decide what to do with their lives. Who knew when, or if Goddess Amber would speak again. She had spoken more this spring than in any living memory.

Tanna almost hoped the Goddess would be silent for a while. If the Goddess only spoke when angry, she didn't want to hear her speak again. Hopefully, someday, she would speak kind words to Tanna and her villas.

## Chapter 38

Zella lifted the entry off the ground. After rescuing the women's pits, she knew what to listen for.

Heavy breathing escaped the pit.

"Are you down there?"

"Who?" It was little more than a whisper.

"It's Zella. Where is the ladder? Where did they hide it?"

"No idea."

The person shuffled closer to the entrance.

A rat scurried under the flapping windsun. Its movement brought out the thin twig lines of the ladder leaned against the wall, underneath the windsun. This one was more rickety than the ladders at the women's pits.

She hurried over to grab it. It was lightweight, almost too light, for even a child's weight. The ladder slipped down the hole, barely touching the top.

"Hurry. We don't know how long we have."

Zella wasn't sure if there were one or two men down there.

The first man climbed the ladder. He slid over the rim and onto the floor. He groaned, glanced at Zella, and then crawled towards the entry.

More shuffling sounded from the hole.

She wanted to wait here until the other man came up. "Who are you?" Zella reached out to the man crawling, while the other man wiggled the ladder.

He pointed at his mouth.

Of course. Blake may have abandoned them without water. How many days had it been? She reached for her water gourd, and handed it to him.

He smiled at her as he took it. After drinking a few sips, he relaxed and sat up right.

The other man had crawled to the top of the ladder. He appeared worse. Ragged, dirty, and bruised on his face. There was something familiar about the face. Something about the nose maybe.

He crawled across to the first man, who handed him the water gourd. After a few sips, he said, "Who?"

"I'm Zella. You are?"

The man turned his head.

Almost as if he didn't understand her words. Perhaps the heat, or

lack of water, made it difficult for them to understand her.

"We have to hurry. There may be more roamers around. We have to help you back to the camp. How you both will make it, I have no idea."

The two men glanced at each other and crawled to the entry.

If the men were no longer able to walk, the trip back to Shells would take days, not two marches. And, they hadn't found Varl and Vira. Where could they be?

Dusk crept across the Grass Sea, lengthening shadows, to hide, them, and roamers as well. No one had asked Blake if there were any more roamers before his death. She should have, before they took him to the lake to be judged by Goddess Kafa. Her mistake could lead them to fear harmless roamers. Nothing she could do about it now.

The dig pits could be hiding people, or could be a good place to hide themselves. Zella dropped to the ground, and motioned to Yola to do the same. The group crawled to the tiny pits, not deep enough to hide them well. Growing shadows would have to hide them while they ate something for energy to march.

Zella reached the first pit, the one dug by Vira. She slid to the bottom and moved to the other side.

The two men slid down next, then Yola.

She handed out dried meat and fruit. It was a quick high energy food for long marches. There were no sweet foods for quick energy for the men. They munched the dried meat and fruit. They drained the two water gourds. Shadows grew long as the men recovered their strength.

The men watched her, as if they didn't trust her. She had to speak, had to move them somewhere safe, even if they couldn't reach Shells tonight.

"Where are you from?" Zella kept her voice low.

The dirtier man turned his head to one side, listened, turned his head. "Mills. Nacht travel."

Zella said, "Not travel? You can't stay here." Her arm waved at the open place with no safe shelter, food, or water.

He smiled and shook his head. "Nacht." He waved his arm up at the sky, formed a fist with his hand, and brought it down to his lap. "Nacht." He lifted his fist back up. "Tag."

Zella couldn't understand what he meant. She was sure he wasn't saying what she thought he was saying. Once, many languages had been spoken. Perhaps Mills had spoken a different



language than she knew. That might be why they were not part of the same community.

Yola looked at the men. "Night."

The man nodded.

Zella wasn't sure how they would communicate, if simple words were different. Perhaps, they had common complex words. "We found where the women were hid. We rescued them. We are missing four people. Any idea where they may be?"

The man leaned toward her and listened.

"I'm Emory. Heard voices speak kinder name. Mills came together in ancestor's tales. Re-learn ancestor's ways, and words. Here a few seasons, can understand, though not speak the same way."

Zella concentrated. It wasn't only the words that were different. The vibrations were too. Something familiar, though not as familiar as she would like. She wanted to know him better. Something about this man was important. Her heart beat fast.

Emory put his arms on his chest and rocked them back and forth.

At first she was confused, was he cold? Then she said, "Baby?" "Kinder," and held his hand up to about a toddler's height.

Mills, kinder. Someone else had mentioned Mills. "Rusty. Are you Rusty's sponsor?"

The man smiled. "She where?"

Zella wanted to rush this man off to find them. He would never make it, not in his condition. "Off to the east, in the villas, with her brother."

The man opened his eyes wide, and his hands dropped to the ground, "Bruder, she has one?"

Zella didn't know how long this man had been held captive, was the child his? Or was it a rattler. She shivered. She couldn't leave the child to die if it was a rattler. She had held him. He was past that age now anyway. His mother was dead. No one need ever know. Rusty didn't know the customs and had never said. "Baby."

Emory nodded. "Go to them? See Linda again." A smile spread across his face.

She didn't want to disturb his peace by telling him of Rusty's mother's last days. A lie wouldn't do. If Rusty's mother were Linda, she had died. Right now, that was all he needed to know. She couldn't tell him how. He wouldn't understand. "Not now."

Emory's head and hands trembled. Large tears slid down his

face.

There wasn't enough water to spend on tears. She held her finger up to her lips, and he settled down. He would hear Rusty's tale soon enough. "The children are away from here, safe."

He fought back the tears.

Zella looked to the other man and Yola. "Any ideas on where Vira and Varl could be hidden?"

"Village?" Emory said.

"We checked the Webbel villa, and they never made it to Shells."

"Once as trader. I found island. Check it?"

Yola was from Shells; did she know of this island?

"We crossed a tree lined meandering river to the west," Zella said.

"Island is well hid. Wasn't supposed to know about it. They tied me up. We go soon," Emory said.

The evening chill crept into the pit. Soon, the nightlife, lizards, and scorpions would be wandering through the arid lands searching for food.

They had to reach the river.

Zella dusted herself off. She was about to climb out of the pit, when she realized, the men might have a little trouble, since they were so weak. She let Yola go first to help pull them out.

Once they were all out, Emory led them cautiously.

It should only take a little while to reach the river. With the extra caution, and the men's weakness, it may take longer. Dover might worry tonight.

They reached the tree line and river north of Klapit. It must be near here that the Webbel camp had harvested trees for fires every winter so none of the other villas would know they stayed here every season.

Emory didn't speak; only pointed.

The cold, rough, and rocky river crossing was ahead.

They slipped across the small river, careful to not trip and call out. They reached the other side, wetter than they wanted to be in the chill of the night. Emory led the way, past boulders, from where the river had once flowed.

Soon, they were in the scrub trees, some taller than others. A barricade of scrub brush blocked their path. Brush trees provided more cover.

A clearing, almost big enough for a villa was in front of them. Several horses grazed on the nearly bare ground in the moonlight.

Unknown men sat around a fire pit talking. A brush covered area almost large enough for a lodge was nearby. It was too dark to see into it, to know if Vira and Varl were hiding in there.

Zella held her spear tighter. They had to surprise the scouts. She didn't want to kill them unless she had to.

A few of the horses moved in their general direction. The horses blocked the view of the men. They would have to go around. She beckoned to the men and Yola, and quietly turned to follow the pile of brush.

She was used to wandering silently through grass. So far, the sounds of their presence had not alerted the horses, or the men. Carefully they trod, small sticks snapping loudly in her ears.

They were closer now.

Sobbing sounded on the other side of the brush. The brush shelter must be to their right.

As they through the brush, voices of the men talking carried and drowned the sobbing.

Carefully, they moved forward to the brush pile. This had to be where people and the horses had to entered and left.

Zella was trying to figure out what to do when she heard a strange sound.

Thin high notes warbled out into the air. Something out of place in this overgrown location.

It sounded like Varl or Sharel playing a flute.

Zella could send an encouraging sound to match, and maybe they would hear it. She hoped the roamers around the fire didn't recognize it.

She hadn't practiced her bird calls since last summer. Three notes should do it, as the flute ended its song.

The sobbing quieted.

The men around the fire pit talked loudly now. They may not have even heard the flute.

"How could you let those two horses escape? They were the best we had. Young inexperienced riders! That's what Blake sent me."

"You were inexperienced yourself," a younger voice said.

"I learned! You didn't."

"It was my first trip out. I don't know how she jumped and knocked me off."

"Well, you won't have another horse until another is born, or captured. If I didn't need you to guard the captives, I'd kill you so you

couldn't tell anyone."

Zella shivered at the words. The men and woman beside her moved closer for warmth, or safety.

The men's voices notched down as she peered at the blockade. There had to be a way in and out. Scrambling over the logs would make a lot of noise, which is probably how they guarded it. She reached to Emory and raised her spear up to ask him.

He pointed at one place. The brush was less dense there. They could go over it. She needed a distraction though.

"How are the captives?" One of the scouts said.

"I'll go check," the one who had been chastised said.

Her birdcall sounded low and long.

The flute played high and fast, much like in some of Marin's ceremonies. The roamers at the fire pit appeared to relax, as they focused on dishing out food for a late evening meal.

Notes from the flute sounded closer and faster, as the young scout approached the shelter.

She hoped she was reading the signal right. Zella motioned to Emory to go first.

His face paled as he crawled over the fence.

She followed. They stayed in the shadows and moved closer to the flute sounds coming from the shelter. Was it nine people against nine strong men, or eight not so strong, against ten?

The young scout reached the shelter and crawled through the entry.

Zella slid between the shelter and the barricade to listen.

"Who is it?" The young man's voice was vaguely familiar.

"Not sure," Varl said. "Are you with us?"

"He wants me dead."

"It wasn't your fault Dan. The Goddess chose," Varl said.

"I hope I live to know the Goddess you speak of. Do you have the sharpened sticks? How do we know when to go?"

"The bird will tell us."

Zella smiled. They had something. It wasn't much.

The flute faltered.

She edged around to the side of the shelter. The bird whistle sounded loud and clear. Maybe too clear.

## Chapter 39

The dead young woman's tear streaked mother carried her body to the fire pit Jorn had prepared.

Tanna wasn't sure what to say. The group had to decide where to bury the dead, or maybe cremate them.

Another woman pushed past the mother, shoving her to the side.

"You let it fall and kill them! My brother tried to help, like Cealya did. I know he did! How dare you come! We would have escaped!"

Cealya walked up to the woman. "Yes, you would have. Where would you have gone? You cannot cross the large river to go back to Shells. You are not strong enough to walk somewhere safe. You would die of thirst. We didn't have everything prepared."

"Then let me die here, with the brother you killed!" She glared at Tanna and crumpled to the ground.

Tanna shivered. Goddess Amber would hold her partially responsible for all those who had died.

The walls fell in unexpected directions. She thought the other rocks had been stacked up in such a way they wouldn't fall. Perhaps Jorn's men had loosened them, and they had fallen because of it. Had Blake known how they would fall? Would he have killed his own roamers as well as the dig leaders and dig team?

Robin had helped the woman carrying her daughter stand up. They carried the broken body to one side of the open space.

There were many bodies that must be treated with respect. Wild animals should not have the opportunity to devour bad spirits. Many of the dead were at least partially buried. Animals would eat the remains. However, they could die too, if rocks fell on them while they ate.

"My brother has to be buried with the good people who died," the screaming woman said.

"Hardly," another woman said. "Do you know what he did to me?"

"He never." The shouting woman gurgled. No more sound came out.

Robin ran forward. "Damage to the voice box. Let me help her away from here, down to the river."

The screaming woman was right. Many could find a friend or family member among the fallen. Here, at Shells, and even at Almond villa with Rusty and the grandmother. That same once good

person might have killed, or maimed, another member of the survivors, or those who had died already.

The living gathered together outside the walls as the shadows lengthened. The dead would have to wait to be buried until morning. The wounded were placed to one side. Dead bodies and bones stacked in piles closer to the river.

All five villas helped. Cealya ran back and forth, showing some of the Webbel villa where to find water and fuel for fires to warm the wounded. Shims villa members watched and helped the nineteen people wounded in the fall of the walls. Surviving captives would need more medical attention later. Right now, they needed food, warmth, and water. There weren't enough blankets to go around.

Tuttle and Lava members who weren't hurt searched for food plants. Almond members chatted until everyone talked, and visited, so they could begin to heal, and feel less of the night cold.

The community had quickly pulled together in this crisis.

Jesna and Prina looked at the tall grass longingly as they wrapped some in bundles to help the fires warm quickly.

"Jesna, Prina."

They dropped the grass bunches in their hands.

"How quick can we cut some of this tall grass and loose weave mats? There aren't enough blankets. Will it help?" Tanna knew it would. Plus, it would keep everyone active, helping them stay warm as well.

Jesna smiled. "Sure, as soon as we have a few grass bundles twisted for the fires. Several people together can cut grass. And a few of the children can carry it to the fires."

"Good. Don't worry about nice or fancy. Teach everyone how to make the quick warm covers I've seen you do for hunters in winter snows."

Adrian watched the scene of devastation, staring at the broken slab covering the scout's bodies. "Not over," he said.

"Not all dead. One crying over there. Try save them?" He struggled to speak, pointing at the corner of the slab that had fallen on the roamers.

"You think so?" Tanna said.

"Yes." He turned to face her, tears in his eyes. "Son?"

If this man feared his son might be among the dead, she had to find out now.

The bodies would have to be moved. She had hoped to do it in the morning. Maybe the Goddess wanted her to save a few more

people.

"Jorn," she yelled.

Before long he appeared. "What's wrong Tanna?"

Tanna waved at Adrian. "He heard sounds under here. We need to move this stone."

Nine roamers had been trapped under it. Three arms and two legs stuck out.

Moving it would not be easy. Even with all the people they had.

Robin had heard her. "Have Jesna make a quick rope. I have one length. I'll bring the horses. We won't need as many people that way." He hurried off.

"Listen for how many voices you hear," Tanna said.

A shout from inside the rubble drew her attention.

"One more alive. Bring Robin here!"

"He's gone for the horses," Tanna shouted. She ran to where the cry came from. Sharp, scattered rocks could cause her to fall. After scrambling through the rubble, Tanna reached the woman who had shouted.

This rock wasn't too heavy. A few people could lift it.

Jorn helped slide it over, away from the body.

It was mangled, almost beyond recognition as human. It was one of the men Dale had known as a dig leader. This man might have been one who harmed the young woman. If so, he didn't deserve to live.

She checked his pulse. It was weak.

Beside her, Jorn watched and waited, not saying a word.

Jorn was the eldest leader. Surely, he hadn't decided to allow her to take over this rescue entirely. He wasn't old enough to give up leadership. Unless he felt part of this whole situation was his fault. Unless, the gen four grandmother was right. He must be the rattler that didn't know he was.

"Take him Jorn. Robin must see him. The young woman's mother must see him. She will know."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she hurried back to find Jesna.

Jesna was by the fire, showing the person closest to the cold winds how to quickly weave a grass blanket.

"Jesna, we need rope, and lots, quick. More injured have been found, under the slabs."

"Ask my mother over there." Jesna pointed towards the older woman who had named Jesna and Prina for Tanna. "She has a gatherboard full."

Tanna went to her.

Jesna's mom had plenty of rope.

If Tanna would listen to a tale, she would even help Robin and Tanna tie it onto the stone.

Tanna wanted to hurry. This woman knew far more about safely and securely tying ropes than she ever would, so she urged her to follow. She grabbed the woman's gatherboard and helped her up.

The woman prattled on, though only half of Tanna's mind listened.

They reached the slab as Robin did with the horses. He reached for the gatherboard as Tanna handed it to him.

"They found another and carried him to the wounded area. They want you to see him."

"Soon. After we finish here. This man may need me as much."

The old woman was on the ground, showing him where to brace the boulder with the rope.

Robin handed the rope end to Tanna and walked around to the other side. He slid it under the rock.

A scream rent the air.

Tanna grimaced. She almost dropped her end of the rope.

Robin glanced at Tanna. He wrapped the rope around the other side, and came back so the old woman could tie the knot strongly.

"Pull the other piece out. Can you tie the horses together?" The gen three woman tottered on her feet.

Tanna ran to tie the neck ropes together firmly.

The woman then tied the other long rope to her first knot. She pulled both pieces with her, and tied one to each horse, lending as much strength and stability as possible.

Jorn returned with a few strong men, including Adrian.

"Okay. You men push. And Tanna, lead the horses forward," Jesna's mother said.

Tanna glanced worriedly at the men. The stone was heavy.

"Wait," Robin said. "I'll stick some logs under this end closest to the horses, it may help."

Robin placed a few logs under the upper edge of the stone. He hurried to the back with the other men.

"Okay, everyone ready?" Jorn asked. "Tanna, urge the horses."

Silence except for the cackling fire.

Tanna patted Sandy's head and spoke gently to her.

"Okay, let's push!" Jorn said.

Tanna urged the horses forward. They all heard the scream as it



faded out, under the slab.

The people behind her struggled over the rocky ground and broken bodies.

She pulled with the horses. Encouragement might not be enough.

The scream grew louder as the slab moved across the bodies.

"They're out!" Robin yelled. "At least enough."

"Looks like three alive, maybe," Jorn said.

Tanna took a deep breath. Several people were there to see to the dead and dying. She didn't want to see anymore dead or wounded bodies. The two horses nuzzled her as she untied them from the rock. Sweat glistened in the fire light. A drink at the river would be good for them all.

They deserved a rest after all their hard work the last several days. Though how horses relaxed, she didn't know. They nibbled on the fresh shoots close to the water's edge. She wanted to leave them here. They seemed content to stay nearby, and didn't like the smell of death any more than she did.

She filled her water gourd and walked back as the stars peeked out.

The horses followed behind her.

It would be a long night. The dead waited. A decision had to be made.

A wolf howled in the distance, soon followed by an echo across the river. The horses tossed their heads and snorted.

Lions and wolves would arrive soon, potentially wounding many more.

Tanna reached the area where the wounded rested. The screaming person was another man. Guilty or not, she would have to decide. They had no walls tonight to protect the people, only the fires.

"Robin, I think for our safety, protection, and the warmth of the wounded, we all need to move over to where the dead are, and cremate them."

It wasn't what anyone wanted to hear. No one wanted to spend the night next to a fire cremating the dead.

Robin carried the wood he had brought from Shells. A few other men went to the scrub brush by the river, led by women with torches to gather more. The fire would burn hot, and stink. No one wanted to smell it, or smell of it in the following days.

They had no other choice for their own safety.

Somehow, tomorrow, they had to move all of these people back safely to Shells. It was at least a full day's march with strong, healthy people. How they would make it now, she had no idea.

Bonfires flared around the dead, as the wolves howled closer. Even the complainers would rather be near the stink of burning flesh than be left outside, unprotected from potential attack.

Tanna held her head, resting, wondering what had happened to the not quite gen two girl she had been before she left Lava.

"They told us building a wall would keep us safe from wolves, and we listened." One of the captives wove a blanket.

"Where are the men?" Jorn asked the woman.

"Some are long gone. Blake ordered many to be killed, so they would never tell. A few are the skeleton men who came out first, when they opened the hole in the wall."

"So there are more out there, somewhere?" Tanna asked.

"Somewhere. Sponsors, sons, brothers. No one knows for sure."

Zella would want all these people to come back to their villas. If those who escaped came back with help to rescue their families, they would be no one there. There were no tools to make clay tablets. Even if there were, would rescuers from other villas be able to read them? Many missing roamers would. And that would be dangerous. Better to leave no record of where they were going. Even if it meant some families might never rejoin.

Robin sat beside her.

So much had happened in a few days. It felt as if she had been in the center of activity for most of her life. Surely, others here must feel the same. Maybe on the walk back, they could spread out and talk.

A lion's roar nearby brought the sweating and snorting horses up to Tanna and Robin.

Tanna patted their heads.

The bodies of the dead burned in front of her. No one would ever forget this night.

## Chapter 40

Zella's bird whistle pierced the air. Louder and stronger than she expected. She hefted her spear and rushed around the brush shelter into the open.

The scouts at the fire pit stood up. Mouths agape, as if they didn't know what had happened.

She rushed forward, straight for the one who had yelled at the younger scout. The scream that echoed from her lungs startled her. A loud, drawn out screech that seemed to reach back to the depths of the ancestor's tales.

The distance between her and the roamers at the fire pit tunneled out. It felt as if she had been running forever. And nothing changed.

The roamers at the fire pit had not moved.

Wind whipped her face. Noise rolled up behind her like waves.

A roamer was in front of her.

She reached back and slammed her spear into the face of the man.

He crumpled to the ground.

Her arm was jammed backwards by the sheer force of the blow.

She dropped her hands to her knees and panted from the run and the primal scream.

Blood oozed from the scout's skull.

Zella vomited onto it, not helping matters. She staggered backwards, right into something solid.

Turning, she saw the body of a horse, lying on the ground. The noise and sights became clear around her. The horse had a spear in its side and thrashed toward her.

Zella grabbed her spear.

It wouldn't loosen from the scout's skull.

She grabbed a burning branch and turned to see who was where.

Most of the fighting was over.

Nala and a young man beat one of the roamers over the head with a heavy branch.

Sharel ripped apart the tunic of one of the dying roamers.

Varl and Vira were side by side, beating two roamers into the ground. Two horses stood behind them. Others were missing.

Yola cut the tunic off the man she had killed with a rock. The

quiet man was on the ground motionless.

Emory wasn't in sight.

The horse behind her stopped thrashing.

Zella crawled around it.

There was Emory. And the roamer he had attacked.

She dropped to the ground. "Emory? Are you alive?"

He groaned.

Firelight flickered eerily over the scene. Blood everywhere.

Broken bones gleamed amidst the blood and mud. The battle tales of the ancestors were hardly horrible enough a warning.

She barely knew this man.

The massive blood loss was too great.

"Kinder," he said.

"I will care for them," Zella said.

Emory smiled. His body began to tighten. Intact muscles hardened, and lost their elasticity. Death had devastated his body. He didn't deserve to die.

A tear slipped down her cheek.

Varl carefully took her hand off the dead man's arm. "Please Zella, we need you."

She didn't want to turn away from him. Emory had needed her, to return to his children. He hadn't lived. He didn't know the truth about the children's mother. Goddess Amber would have to tell him.

Zella wiped her face and looked up at Varl.

"This other man is weak."

She walked to him. No visible damage. He had killed the roamer he had attacked.

A few cuts and bruises, no great blood loss. "Hot tea for him. Anyone else hurt?" She sniffled and wiped her nose again.

The others held up their arms. Blood glistened in trickling trails on arms and legs. Some cuts were nasty, though no massive bleeding. Nala helped the young scout over to Zella.

"Dan needs help."

"I think it's broken." He tried to hold the arm up at the elbow. About mid ways of the lower arm, it bent at an unexpected angle.

Zella grimaced. She didn't know enough medicine. For tonight, his pain could be relieved, maybe.

Dover could set his arm tomorrow, if they made it back.

"Boil fresh clean water."

Turning, she pointed to Varl. "This horse sacrificed itself. We need food. Can you cut as much as we can cook tonight?"

He walked to one of the dead men and pulled out a knife.

Vira went to help him. Horse wasn't their favorite meat. It would do. They were all hungry.

She had to try to save the one weak man with no name, and no words.

"We have to pull the dead away. All except Emory. Drag them as far from the brush shelter as we can."

Yola turned her head.

Zella didn't want to see it either.

They first moved the man Emory had killed. Blood left a glistening, narrowing trail as they dragged the body across the clearing. It was night, so they wouldn't see it once outside the firelight.

Horses shied away, between them and the brush shelter.

After the first body, they took a few deep breaths before going back. It was hot exhausting work, even with a cool breeze blowing. The brush prevented most of the breeze from reaching them. The last body they tried to move was the man Zella had hit. Her spear would not come out of his bloody head.

Vira had horse meat soup simmering now.

Varl sliced more meat off the dead horse.

"Varl, can you help?" Zella panted. If there were more than one more, she couldn't move another. Her sore arms ached as much as they had from pulling Calen's stretcher all day.

He walked over and pulled hard on her spear. It took all his effort to free it. He pointed Zella toward Vira, and told Yola to grab the other leg.

Yola took a deep breath as she reached for the dead man's leg.

Zella took her spear and walked back to the fire. Varl wouldn't hurt her, though Yola wouldn't know that. Yola had seen far too much pain and suffering.

Vira, Sharel, and Nala sliced the meat so thin, they should be able to carry it tomorrow. They laid it across a loose frame of poles next to the fire pit.

The horse meat would be a gift to Shells.

She walked over to Dan.

He stared into the fire, holding his arm gently in his lap.

"We can't leave the horses behind," he said.

"How can we take them?"

"I can. I could ride. I even let Nala ride one day. The day we lost the horses."

Nala smiled at them.

He can't be too bad if Nala liked him. Goddess Amber would understand if Zella waited until morning to determine his crime and obligation. Then, the rest of the council could decide, and not her.

"Well, let's see what we can do for that arm now."

He held it out closer to the firelight so she could see.

Discoloration, an odd angle.

Zella collected limbs, and braced it.

Dan had to keep it from moving too much.

"Is there any spare cloth around here?"

"On the dead men," he said.

That would never do.

Varl handed her a strip of horse's hide from the leg.

Zella set to work.

Nala held the sticks in place.

Wrapping the limbs around his arm with still bleeding horse hide was not easy, physically, or on Zella's stomach.

Dan grimaced.

There was only one quick cure for that kind of pain. She turned away long enough for Nala to reach out with a quick kiss on his cheek.

Turning back, she tried not to grin. Nala knew as much as she did about medicine.

Drying blood glistened in the fire light.

Willow bark in her gatherboard would make a strong tea for them all. It took a while for the tea to steep, and a few good gourds had been broken.

Dan sat silently beside Nala.

She touched his arm and he smiled. It was obvious, communication beyond words occurred between them.

Sharel arrived with all the dingy blankets from the shelter. They would sleep outside next to the fire tonight. For warmth, and to see any scavengers who came for the bodies.

Zella felt truly alone as she settled down to sleep. Tanna had been with her every night she could remember. Recently, Dover had been there to keep her warm. Now she snuggled alone by the fire. All the others were nearby, and lost in their own thoughts and dreams.

Wolves howled.

Horses stamped and neighed when one came too close. The scout's bodies would be reduced to bones by morning.

As for Emory, she wasn't sure what to do. They had placed his body near the fire. She didn't want it eaten. Cremation wasn't right.

Vira had suggested placing his body in the river.

Zella shivered at the memory of how Blake had been swallowed. She didn't want that for Emory. Somehow, it seemed wrong. Morning would bring answers.

Chirping birds startled her awake. She stretched.

Others were getting up slowly, moving carefully. Achy, and bruised from the fight.

Nala leaned over Dan, checking his arm. With such tender care, Zella didn't have to worry about him.

She helped Vira prepare a light meal.

"It shouldn't take us too long to reach Shells. Maybe half a day with the wounded."

Vira stirred the soup.

"Has anyone told you about them?"

"The roamers talked about them a lot. If you can call shouting and yelling talking."

Zella glanced at the corner of the clearing where the men's bodies had been left. Bits of tattered clothing and bones were all she could see. Not much left. Only flesh for the smallest of scavengers now.

She took her dish of warm horse soup and walked over to Nala and Dan.

"We can take their lead ropes. Everyone who is okay can lead one. They are used to being led as much as having a rider."

Nala hung onto his every word.

"With help, I can ride. I might bump less, or I might not. We can load meat on them. One horse can carry the other man who is so weak."

"Do you think they will carry their friend?" Zella asked.

"They won't like it. They will stay together."

"Let's eat and go," she said.

On the walk to Shells, they followed Dan's lead. He was always careful to defer to Zella. He told them how to open the gate so the horses could go through. They had one more horse than person who could lead them. Dan rode, and led it with Emory's body draped across, and tied down.

They had to wade through the first river soon after leaving the clearing. Not easy to do holding onto a horse.

"There should be two more river crossings," Dan said. "We can

veer north and save two crossings of the same river."

Before they reached the second crossing, they saw water deep to the south.

"Is that a lake?" Zella glanced at it longingly.

"Yes, a small one. I've been there once. Scary snakes live near there. Rattlers, and others, that are more deadly," Dan said.

After the second crossing, they decided to rest.

The strain was visible on the young man's face. He needed some hot tea. They couldn't wait to make a fire for water to boil. Their clothes would dry in the warm sunshine before long. Dan had made sure Emory didn't fall off the horse, and had checked on the other silent man as well after each crossing.

So far, the meat hadn't been dunked in the rivers.

The horses splashed through the river, and then drank their fill.

She yearned to see her daughter again.

Dan rode beside Zella. "I think we need to veer left here."

Zella glanced up at him. "Perhaps. I think they will be to the north instead."

She waited to see his reaction.

"You've been here more recently than me." He fell back in line.

He was right. Burned Shells that he knew, lay to the south. New Shells villa lay to the north. No point in visiting the burned villa with fresh horse meat. Best to keep going.

Soon, they crossed the garden area. Someone, she wasn't sure who, was working in the garden. On they passed, holding onto the horses with the horse meat and the two men.

They reached the clearing where Dover was supposed to be helping the villa rebuild. The first people who saw them coming stopped what they were doing. Small children ran and hid behind adults, or any objects they could find.

Zella would have found it funny, if she didn't know the reason for their fear. These horses had been used to scare these people. Now, they carried one of their own, dead on their backs as food from the Goddess. The council would have to decide if the Goddess wanted them to keep the horses, or let them go once this day was done.

She strode forward, leading a horse. "Where is Dover?"

Relief flooded their faces. Good, they recognized her voice.

Dover walked around the corner of a pile of building material.

"Good," he said. "With horses, we can move the whole villa out here. Thanks for bringing them Zella. We were thinking how much we wished Robin and Tanna had left us the two they found. They won't



need them with all those people anyway."

Women ran forward to grab the bundles of partially roasted horse meat from the backs of the horses.

Dover walked over to the two men he didn't know, one slumped across the horse's back, alive, and barely breathing. He checked the man's wrist and signaled to another man to help with the living man.

The man from Shells carried off the man without words.

Emory's body had slipped down the side of the horse.

"I couldn't save him." She motioned, and another man from Shells led the horse with Emory's body behind the reconstructed lodges.

Dover glanced sharply at Dan. "See me later." He hurried to where the man without words rested in the shade.

Zella decided to join the group leading the horses to the old Shells camp. After all, she was rested enough to help with the hard work. The horses would make it lighter. They could always decide what to do with them later in the day.

# Chapter 41

They should have been back to Shells by now. The group who had gone to Westpit had camped two nights already. The first night, they camped near broken stones, a place that must have once meant something to the ancestors. It was now in the middle of the Grass Sea, with no water.

On day two, they crossed the large river. Sandy and Robin's horse had to carry the weakest survivors one by one across the river. Ropes kept the horses from Westpit with them as well. Jesna and Prina had kept watch over those horses. The whole group could go only as fast as the slowest person among them.

This day had moved slower than the previous day. If they didn't reach the camp soon, some of the men and women never would.

A lake was visible in the east. She had heard the whispers of the people from Shells about the lake, though she didn't quite catch their words. It was obvious they were afraid of it.

"Robin, go see if many are falling behind. I'm going ahead, to see how much farther it is."

Robin rode to the back of the group.

Tanna turned Sandy and was about to go forward when Adrian waved to her. "Yes?"

"Walk with?" Adrian asked.

Maybe the man could keep up. She nodded.

She urged Sandy onward.

Rounding the lake, they veered northeast and found the trail. The clearing for Shells was only a few horse lengths away.

Only, it was no longer there.

The burned building in the center was now dismantled. The fire pit, and the two Almond girls she had left behind waited. Tattered rags and bits of sticks from the lodges were scattered around the clearing.

Adrian was right behind her.

The two girls sat in the middle of the desolation.

Tanna rode over to them. "I'm sorry we were gone so long. I hope the rest of the group can make it here tonight. There are many hurt."

"The figures are complete. We kept them in the box. We had to let the fire go out, so they wouldn't over cook."

Tanna had been gone almost twice as long as they needed.

"Shells moved a short walk away. We can go find Zella."

"The group coming behind me won't make it any further tonight. We need all the healers."

"I'll go." One girl stood up.

The horn blared beside her.

She turned to Adrian.

Adrian dumped his gatherboard on the ground. He ran forward. The horn, swung loosely in his hand.

Tanna's gaze followed.

A thin man staggered out of the tall grass.

"Son!"

"We survived."

The big bear of a man grabbed the skeleton and whirled it around. "Child."

Tears flowed down his face as he walked back to Tanna. "Help."

The skeletal man tried to speak.

Another man walked through the grass. Not quite so thin, and not healthy either. He tried to smile as he walked forward, holding his spear horizontal in front of him.

Horse hooves pounded toward the clearing.

Robin rode up behind her.

More horse hooves pounded from another direction.

Tanna, and the men, grabbed their spears, facing the sound.

"Wait." One of the girls held up her arm.

The first horse flew through the grass from the north. A young man rode, with one hand. The other arm was tied to his chest.

Behind him came a grey horse, with Dover holding on, face as pale as could be.

Tanna tried not to laugh at the sight. She was unsure about the young man, now riding around her and Sandy.

"Tanna! You're back! Zella has been worried about you. She was going to send some of us out to look for you in the morning," Dover shouted. He slid off the horse. "There, that's better. The whole crowd will be here soon."

Robin and Tanna slid off their horses.

Dover hugged Robin, and then Tanna.

She turned to Adrian. "Dover, he needs help."

"What, him? He looks well enough," Dover said.

Then, the skeletal son of Adrian peeked around him.

"Oh. What happened? No, don't tell me know. Do you have any food?"

"Not much here." The Almond girl lowered her head.

"We don't have much either," Tanna said. "We were gone far longer than planned, and so many sick and wounded."

The young man rode back the way they had come.

"Food will be here soon. He can bring some of the horse meat," Dover said.

"It seems there are many tales to tell," Robin said.

"Yes, perhaps we should tell them by firelight after a good meal?" Dover waved the two men to an area he could examine them.

Tanna and Robin decided where to set up the sick area for those Dover would need to tend to. It wasn't long before the rest of the group trickled in. Those who had gone on the trek south were exhausted. Too weak, even the healthy ones, to help with preparations for the night. Over a hundred people almost too tired to eat.

Soon, Zella arrived. Tears streaked down her face as she hugged Tanna. "I was afraid you wouldn't come back."

Tanna smiled. "I enjoy travel. I'll always come back."

"Dover and I, we want to stay here."

The community had changed. Change would mean new ideas and new places, new relationships, and new dreams. It would bring new tales for the tale-tellers. A new way of life for everyone, whether for good or bad, life would never be the same.

Soon, more horses arrived, carrying food, and shelter. The traveling group would not have made it to where Shells had moved, tonight anyway.

Calen sat beside Dover and Zella, chatting away as the group ate.

Jorn was beside Tanna and Robin. Thinking back, she remembered something. Glancing around, no one was paying attention, so she whispered to Jorn. "I know Mom isn't your real sister. I know who your real mom is. I'll never tell."

Jorn lowered his head, and put his hands in his lap. "Everyone I have hurt, I am sorry."

The group silently waited.

"I never knew what Blake was doing. If I had, I would have stopped him. I know longer feel I can lead this group, or the council. I will ask Tanna to help you all choose a new leader. I never sponsored a child that I know of."

"No, you can't quit leading now!" Several people said.

"Who will guide us home?"

"Tanna will," he said softly.

"Why? What did you do that was so bad?"

"Look around you," Jorn said. "We have no shelters tonight. We have no fish from summer fishing. There are no nutria stews, or nutria dried for winter food. We have no new tools, or artifacts, from digging. We have nothing."

Jorn covered his face with his hands as sobs broke out.

A muffled roar of voices sounded as people argued around him.

Tanna reached out to him. "It isn't too late!"

Her shouts brought everyone's words to a standstill. "We have a lake behind us, and bison in the Grass Sea. I don't know how many days we have. We will store some food for winter."

"We have sixteen horses to take the food home. We can always start a new herd. There's even a corral at Almond villa that we can fix up in a day. Horses can give us food and shelter."

Adrian's skeletal son waved. "I can help."

"Were you one of the men who worked on Westpit?" Tanna asked.

He nodded.

Jorn reached out to her. "I can take a few of our hunters, and horses. If we hurry, we can harvest some nutria and meet you all back at Almond. Zella can have her nutria stew."

Zella blushed and laughed.

"We need to have the ceremony in the morning, as the sun rises. Everyone please be here. At the fire, well before dawn." Tanna wanted to be by herself. Tonight she must finish preparing the ceremonies. She and Robin would have to wait for time alone.

The people wondered off to find a place to sleep. Some prepared themselves for the various journeys.

After most people settled in to rest, her mom sat beside her.

"Tanna, I buried a man. I killed a man too."

"I think we all did. The Goddess isn't angry. Try not to hurt." She hugged her mom.

Tears glistened on Zella's cheeks in the firelight. "Emory was Rusty's sponsor. He died, saving my life. I promised to care for her."

Tanna cried on her mom's shoulder. Rusty would be sad, and proud of her sponsor. She and her mom talked into the night.

Zella told her she had been digging in the pits near Shells new home. She had found many useful objects. She wanted to stay, and dig through the winter. No objects like the one Blake had found. If

the council agreed, Klapit would be left alone to recover from what had happened there.

The first rays of light peeked across the horizon.

Tanna stood at the fire, over the box. It was warm now. Not hot like before, when baking the clay. Not cold, as it had become while awaiting her return. Each piece would be a reminder.

The people's faces were lit by the eerie firelight, waiting. No ceremony like this had been performed in living memory.

Allowing the anticipation to grow, she waited longer.

At last, as a new ray of sunshine peeked over the horizon, Varl and Sharel played a drum and flute. A sound remarkably like the dawn itself.

Tanna stepped forward. "Most of you were here for the death ceremony. Let not the deaths of those who died be forgotten."

She reached for the lid, and opened it with her bare hands.

The crowd gasped.

Tanna pulled out a few charred bones, those of the dead who had chosen to die here, and the roamers who would have killed them.

"As their bones and dust mingled, they bring forth a new life and a new community joined together."

She reached into the box and pulled out the bear figurine. "In recent memory, adults lived separately, and only visited when they wanted a child. Now, we can choose. We don't have to live apart, or together, we can choose. We are all one people now, not separate villas."

The crowd murmured.

Some would be afraid once again.

The clay cube came out of the box next. "My villa, the Lava villa no longer exists. We are part of a larger group of people." She handed the figure to Zella.

Next was the clay pot. "This pot represented the Shims villa. As great healers, they rarely accepted a child not born to one of their members. Perhaps, we lost the skills of many this way."

Dover stepped forward to take the pot.

She pulled the clay flute out. "Almond has agreed to share their musical talents, so we all have music any season, not only at Spring and Fall Trades." She smiled at Varl as he took the flute.

Cheering and shouts sounded in the background.

The clay rope was next. Vira walked forward carefully, weak from her capture. "Vira has agreed that all who wish to learn; may learn to

weave. She, and the rest of the former Tuttle villa, will share their secrets with you."

Many people clapped their hands. Fear and anticipation shown in the people's eyes. Though, they all wanted to learn new skills. No one wanted to share their special skills.

She pulled out the clay spear. "The former Webbel villa was harmed by their knowledge, as much as helped. All who wish to learn tool making shall. No one person, or group, can hold all the knowledge we need, to provide our homes, food, and protection."

Calen stepped forward and took the clay spear.

"As each person placed a clay mold, they will gather them after the ceremony."

Murmurs escalated around her. They had many more people now. There couldn't be enough to go around.

"A new beginning, a new people. A new name. We are the Pit Miners." The crowd clapped, cheered, and yelled.

Sounds descended to silence.

A shout resounded in the distance.

"Is Jorn here?"

Two people emerged from the east side of the Grass Sea.

At first, Tanna didn't recognize them.

Then, she realized it was Gel and Kleal. Days since she had seen them last, and she didn't recognize them. Her world had changed drastically since then.

"Gel, Kleal, it's good to see you. Is everything okay in Almond?" Jorn said.

Gel walked up to Jorn and glanced at Tanna standing before the quiet crowd. "Yes. Rusty felt she had to come. We have been looking for you for days." Jorn motioned to Tanna.

"Rusty. Is she okay?"

Rusty ran out of the grass carrying her baby brother. She ran into Tanna's arms. "Brother needs a name."

Uden stepped forward carrying Corandra.

Zella whispered to Tanna as she took the infant and held him up for everyone to see.

A perfect choice. A tale yet to be told around the fires. "The child's name is Henry."

Rusty looked up at her, tears on her cheeks. She grabbed Tanna's legs and sobbed loudly. Drying her eyes, she turned to the group. "Thank you."

Uden stood in the background, her outfit blowing in the breeze.

She had come to feed baby Henry.

"Come, join us," Tanna said.

A tiny smile formed, and Uden joined the group around the main fire pit. She was silent.

Corandra cooed and giggled.

People filed past, collecting hand print clay pieces to remind them they were now one people.

Ambrena handed a clay hand cast to Rusty. The young girls laughed and smiled, their tales too low for Tanna to hear.

Many people would move from one villa to another, and some would stay here in Shells. It would be the most exciting, and fun filled winter. However, there would be sad days. Days when those who died would be remembered with longing. And others remembered with fear. She, and many others, would be there to lead the people through.

Tanna held baby Henry.

Naom slept at her feet.

Logan and Kol followed Rusty watching for dropped crumbs from the travel cake she carried.

Ambrena gently tugged her sleeve.

The hope of a new community rested on the life of each and every on here today. As well as those in Almond villa.

The Pit Miners had to be strong to face the mental and physical challenges ahead.

**###**

Thank you for reading Trails: Pit Miners - Tales. I hope you enjoyed this journey through the tales. If you enjoyed it, please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer.

Thanks!

Gail Brown



# **Trails: Pit Miners**

## **Pair 2, Book 2 - Mines**

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# Prologue

Trails Through the Garbage Mines follows Trails Through the Tales as a peek at southern North America approximately 250 to 300 years after Trails Through the Fault Lines and Trails Through the Volcano. Earthquakes and volcanoes reopened the North American Seaway, inundating parts of several states with seawater. In the early, hungry days, animals from zoos were released, or eaten. A small human population survived in a prairie and mountainous region where lions, tigers, and camels now roam. Centuries of warring communities further decimated many populations; at times, leaving several regions without adults, or their history.

# Chapter 1

Sweat trickled off Ambrena's forehead. The lodge was lit only by the flickering fire, even though a late fall morning dawned.

"Need Zella." Tanna's breath rose and fell as the contractions increased.

Ambrena pulled her tunic tight across her chest before she stood and tiptoed through the piles to the entry. She had witnessed easy births. Not this complicated of one. Tanna should have called for Zella long ago.

Ambrena ran. Dust billowed up behind her.

One of Tanna's dogs followed.

Too long without rain. Sunshine welcomed them warmly now. Maybe too warmly. Four of the more crowded lodges stood between her and the treasury.

Ambrena dodged children playing in the dusty dirt. She couldn't stop and admire the dust piles they created.

If she knew enough herself, Zella wouldn't have to be found.

I should have stayed with Tanna, not racing off on the errand to find Zella. Garn, Tanna's oldest, should have been sent to find her. Her first opportunity to help at a birth on her own, and she'd already messed it up. They could take her skill status away if Tanna complained to Zella.

Almost gen two girls she used to play with, stacked dry branches beside the treasury for people to fill in wall gaps from the winter winds. Warmth at this season could mean bitter cold to come, and soon. The treasury entry was pinned open to allow any slight breeze to whistle in.

"Are you helping us today?" One of her friends dumped a basket of dried vines from the garden. Another friend nearby had an armful of dried grass to weave summer footwear during the cold season.

"Not today." Ambrena barely paused.

Now, Tanna needed help. If Zella had gone to Shelpit with the miners, Ambrena would have to ask someone to find her. Tanna needed both of them back at the lodge as fast as possible.

"Zella! Are you here?"

Zella stepped into the entry.

Corandra and Henry argued in the background.

"How is Tanna?" Zella shushed the two who had been raised as almost twins.

"She needs you now. Robin is with her until we return."  
Ambrena's hand went to her chest. Tanna didn't need to hear those two arguing right now.

Zella stepped back in to grab a bucket of woven cloth.  
"Corandra, go help Rusty at Shelpit. She will need you. Henry, come and wait with Robin."

"Rusty doesn't want me to help anymore," Corandra said.

"Robin won't do anything interesting while worrying about Tanna," Henry said.

Zella put her hands on her hips. "Mind me. Both of you.  
Corandra, tell Rusty I sent you."

"Maybe she'll let me take the camels to the lake." Corandra tapped Henry's shoulder and raced off in the direction of Shelpit.

Those two should play and work well together, since they had been raised together. For some reason, they fought like no one else. Something about their fighting nagged at her memory. A bad memory from when her barely remembered mother died. Sometimes when the two fought, an acidic smoky odor filled her lungs. Even the cooking fire could cause shadowy memories when the two argued.

Ambrena wrapped her arm around Henry's shoulder. A tear threatened to overwhelm one eye. "Come on Henry. Maybe you can show Robin your new project."

Henry pulled away and rubbed his eyes. "There is nothing Robin hasn't taught me already. I don't have anything to share with him he doesn't already know." He ran off down the path toward Lake Kafa.

If Tanna didn't need her and Zella, she'd go after him. The fighting hurt him. More than it hurt everyone else in Shells, who pulled away from them both. They would be gen two adults soon. If they couldn't learn to live in peace with each other, and the rest of the villa, they would probably both be sent away.

Henry cared.

Corandra didn't.

She'd worry about that later. Ambrena pushed aside the entry into Tanna's lodge.

"Zella and I are here." She rushed to the sleeping mat of the woman who had raised her since her mother's death.

Garn and Pamma, Tanna's two children, sat large eyed on the other side of the fire. Pamma whimpered and hugged her doll close. The doll had once been Ambrena and Rusty's treasured, shared companion. It was dirty and raggedy after many seasons between them, and then Corandra's early childhood games in the mud pits.

Ambrena really should have been a good older sister, and made Pamma a new one. A special doll no one else had played with before.

"Robin, take Pamma and Garn outside please," Tanna said.

Robin pulled Tanna's son and daughter close. "You'll need me. Dover isn't here."

"No. Zella will call, if I need you." Tanna grimaced from a contraction.

Pamma clutched the dingy doll closer and followed Garn and Robin out the entry.

If Pamma were as old as Garn, she could have stayed inside with her mother. Of course, then they wouldn't need Ambrena.

The contractions increased.

Ambrena held Tanna's hand. Sweat glistened and slowly dripped from each of them as they waited through the early morning fire light.

Zella stepped to the entry "Robin, bring buckets of water. I need some to boil." She stirred up the fire, even though the heat was nearly choking for this late in the fall.

Zella had helped at most of the Shells' villa births.

Ambrena intended to learn all she could from her. She had trained at many births the last few seasons. The first had been Garn's birth, a few seasons after Shells was completely rebuilt, and Pamma, only a few trades ago. Now, Ambrena wanted to be like Zella and Dover, someone who healed, regardless of injury.

The first dog and skill training necklace ceremony for her and Rusty had been held at the last Spring Trade. She touched the necklace. The charms that represented Shells, and her future healer status dangled, almost touching. For now, it was void of a child charm, as it should be in the first gen two season. Her dog, Kara, whimpered against the wall, due to have pups any day.

Contractions came quicker, and harder. Tanna cried out in pain and clutched her sleeping mat.

Ambrena wrung her hands and waited. Zella had taught her what to do, and to be ready. A strange tingling sensation crept up her spine as she watched the woman who had raised her, always so strong and full of life, suddenly weak, and deep in pain. Bringing the next gen into the world was not an act for the fragile. Tanna's age hadn't helped. This pregnancy had been increasingly difficult.

Zella wiped Tanna's forehead with cool water from Lake Kafa.

Tanna wanted this child, who would certainly be her last. A third

child of her own. More than many in Shells could claim. Most lodges were full with almost grown children, and orphans, from the dark days.

Those days almost beyond memory were better forgotten. Tanna had taken her, Rusty, and later Rusty's brother Henry to raise as her own. Now, it was time for Ambrena to prove herself to those who believed in the young child she had been.

Without maternal ties, Ambrena could be asked to leave the villa, the only place she remembered living. She wasn't a builder, didn't care for sewing, weaving, mining, or gardening. Learning the healing skills had been her option to contribute to the community. Dover and Robin would need someone trained to replace them, and if she combined their skills with Zella's, no one could dispute her place in the community.

"Focus," Zella said.

Thoughts and fears swirled. She could do this. All she had to do was wait and grab the baby. Ambrena reached forward to squeeze Tanna's hand.

Another contraction forced the smile and unspoken words from Tanna's lips.

Zella helped Tanna to a sitting position, and then handed her tea to sip. The tea might calm the contractions. Mostly, it would relieve some of Tanna's discomfort.

Smoke flittered across Tanna.

Zella closed the entry for privacy. The smoke could only leave through a small flap at the top of the wall now.

As close to the wall as possible, from the sound of their voices, Garn and Pamma chatted. If Pamma grew up interested in healing, Tanna might prefer her own daughter to take the place of healer in the villa, rather than Ambrena, of an unknown mother.

Zella sat beside her on the ground and pulled a blanket close. "You can do it."

Ambrena glanced at her, unsure who she was speaking to. She leaned closer and took the fur Zella handed her.

"You're doing well." Zella leaned back, and checked the water on the fire. She chanted a good luck song she frequently sang at births.

The mucus covered head of the baby peeked out into the interior dimness of late morning.

Zella continued singing as she gathered the cleanup cloths into her lap.

Tanna took a deep breath and relaxed.



The infant landed gently on the fur.

Ambrena hugged her tightly to her own chest, and then checked the newborn.

The infant was a girl, and breathing on her own. No visible complications.

She wrapped the newborn in a piece of animal skin before she handed the child to Zella.

Zella wiped the infant clean, and placed her on Tanna's chest.

The newborn girl cried.

"Can we come in now?" Robin peeked in through the entry.

Tanna shook her head.

"No," Ambrena said. "Tanna needs to be alone with her. Baby is fine."

"Is Tanna fine?"

Ambrena checked the blood loss. She thought it was normal. Zella didn't act concerned, and since Tanna was her daughter, surely she would mention if there were a problem.

"What do you think?" Zella said.

"It's a lot of blood loss. Normal, though, I think?"

Zella nodded.

"She'll be fine Robin." Ambrena wiped at the first mess the newest villa child had created.

The infant gurgled.

Tanna held her close.

Sunlight peeked in as the entry opened and Pamma hurried to her mother's side. She couldn't be kept from her mother. Scrambling to a spot beside Tanna, she stared at the infant in the dim light.

Ambrena cleaned up the blood, and made sure no more bright red leaked. She placed a clean beige fur under Tanna's bottom to catch any more blood.

Tanna glanced at Pamma and then at Zella. "Ola will be her name. She is beautiful."

"A healthy newborn." Zella wiped the sweat off of Tanna's face and arms.

Pamma touched Ola's toe. "Will I be able to help raise her the way Ambrena helped raise me?"

Tanna smiled and patted her first birth daughter. "Of course. Now go tell Robin he can come in. He worries so."

Pamma rushed outside.

"Shall I?" Ambrena held the placenta and bloody furs.

"Come back soon." Tanna patted the infant on her chest.

Ambrena nodded.

Smoke circled around her as the cover lifted and Robin walked in followed by Pamma and Garn. A tear threatened to escape one eye, whether from the smoke, or something else, she wasn't sure.

Pamma hugged her, and then ran to Tanna's side.

## Chapter 2

Corandra stomped off from the villa treasury. Henry irritated her more than anyone, for some unknown reason. Any other person could say the same words in the same tone, and it meant nothing to her.

People's eyes shifted away as she walked by. It seemed no one wanted her around anymore. No one spoke to her, or answered her questions, unless she called them by name. Except Zella, of course. And Dover, when he was in Shells, and not off trading with the other villas.

An unwatched infant crawled on the ground near the edge of the villa. Her glare did not cause it to change direction toward a sleeping dog. If the infant were at the other end of the villa, and pointed toward the lake, Goddess Kafa might have a snack today.

She covered her mouth. No one wanted to meet Goddess Kafa. Only some of the adults had ever seen her. The Goddess had been known to swallow infants, and even adults, whole. Surely, that was merely a story to scare children and make them do what the adults wanted.

Zella had once threatened to take Corandra to the lake to meet the Goddess after she had fought with Henry. Fighting simply wasn't allowed. No other children, or adults, fought that she knew of. Henry didn't so much fight back, as refuse to allow her to tell him what to do. The people used to side with him, and turned up their noses at her. Lately, the villa had started ignoring them both, regardless of if they fought.

The brushy trail to the herd lodge needed cleaning. Branches and leaves littered the ground, as if the trail cleaners hadn't been here for days. The herd lodge was mostly empty. Several of the camels were on a trading trip to Alma and Tuttle. The horses, except the little ones, were working in Shelpit. Mining began early this season, because of the drought.

Her favorite camel toddled forward and nuzzled her hand. At least Ellie understood her. She wasn't a female dog, and hadn't been given to her as her personal helper. No one begrudged Corandra of her company. Ellie would be more of a help than any old dog. Maybe she should ask for Ellie instead of a dog at her adulthood ceremony next Spring Trade. No adulthood necklace had been made by Zella that she knew of. Since she didn't have a skill,

there was no skill charm to add, or future skill to train for.

Corandra wiped her eyes and opened the entry. Being upset wouldn't do her, or anyone else any good. "Come on Ellie. Maybe you can help."

Ellie lifted her head and stepped over the bottom part of the entry.

As she closed the entry, Corandra glanced around the clearing. These camels and horses had been a part of life as long as she could remember. Rusty, Ambrena, and a few older people, remembered life before horses and camels were part of the villa.

Ellie chewed grass as she followed Corandra to Shelpit.

Rusty once liked her, and tried to help her. Hopefully, bringing Ellie would ease the tension that had arisen between them lately.

She peeked through the limbs at the edge of the trail.

With the ground so hard, the horses helped by bringing water from the lake, to loosen the soil so the miners could dig. Ropes dangled down behind the horses to pull wooden and artifact buckets. Drinking water buckets were already filled for the day. The early morning sun would warm the water to drinking temperature, and the shade of afternoon would cool it.

Rusty directed Shelpit now, when Zella or Tanna couldn't be there. Her friend had always been beside her, playing and learning. Now, her friend was a leader, and Corandra had remained behind, without a role in the villa. People listened to Rusty. They asked her questions, and joked about children and animals. They spoke to her before she spoke, more often than not.

No one ever expected Corandra to be a leader of any sort. Would everyone stop working and stare when she walked out? She took a deep breath and walked into the clearing.

"Glenna, we'll need more leaves to keep the ground damp, can you collect some?" Rusty said.

"Sure, watch Zande for me." Glenna picked up a bucket and left her son playing in the sorted artifacts box.

Corandra and Ellie walked over to the water and sorting station. "Zella sent me to you."

"Oh good," Rusty said. "Can you and Ellie bring leaves too? Check the new trees beyond the broken rocks."

"Sure, may I take some water for us?"

"A few water gourds over there, and a harness for Ellie." Rusty turned back to a group of horses dragging buckets of water for the pit.

Corandra gathered her supplies. At least Rusty hadn't sent them to bring back water. That was exhausting and heavy work for her and young Ellie. However, Rusty was sending her off alone with no one else nearby to pick a fight with. Not that anyone else would fight back.

No one was ever supposed to travel alone beyond the broken rocks. If a lion attacked her and Ellie, they'd hear her screams.

Ellie led, picking her way carefully through the broken stones.

Whatever they had once been, they were no longer. Corandra and Rusty used to play here with Ambrena, and Henry too. She had to figure out why she couldn't stand him. There had to be a reason. Everyone used to ask her. They didn't bother anymore. They merely looked away.

Her own mother, Uden, had abandoned her as an infant to follow Fendon to some distant land. Some place where Zella claimed her own mother had gone when she was a child. Corandra laughed.

Wrinkled and wizened Zella as a child. The other children probably threw apples at her; she looked so unusual. Of course, all of the gen three and four grandmothers must have been children once. And someday, if a man would sponsor her child, she might be a grandmother like Zella.

No, not like Zella. All of the Pit Miners would mourn Zella's death. Would they even notice if she were no longer there? She sniffled. Deep thoughts wouldn't fix the day's troubles, and changing the past wasn't possible.

The land around her faded out as she thought about her mother. She didn't remember her at all really. People told stories, behind raised hands. Her mother might know why she and Henry fought. Perhaps, one day, she would take Ellie and search for her.

Shells would be glad to have her gone. Even Rusty sent her out on her own today, as a practice for being sent to find a new group of people to live with. Once she was an adult, they'd be ready to send her away. Her necklace would have no charm. No other villa in the community would take her. She and Ellie would be roamers. Alone. Looking for a lodge. Female roamers were rare. With good reason.

Corandra tripped over the rocks. Here was as good a place to gather leaves as any. She bent down and picked up leaves to fill the bucket. Rusty and Zella hoped that someday the trees would spread over these broken rocks, and protect the children from cuts. For some reason, they didn't like these rocks. They seemed no different to her than the broken rocks near each of the other villas. Rough,

tumbled, grayed, with the occasional fleck of color if fresh dirt were dug out from under them.

When sorting artifacts, Corandra had heard several people talk about some found items being unsafe. She hadn't found an unsafe one in the buckets she had sorted from Shelpit. Or if she had, Zella and Rusty hadn't told her.

She trudged back toward the main clearing with buckets full of leaves. They had to stop when the buckets tipped over and leaves spilled out.

Laughter stopped as she entered the clearing. People walked away from the sorting area with their digging tools.

Rusty never looked up as she pawed through one of the sorting buckets. "Follow them. They'll show you where they need the leaves."

Corandra sniffled.

Rusty had never totally ignored her. She had always had something to say, a word of warning, or even a smile.

She held her head high, and led Ellie after the women. After dumping her load for them to spread the way they wanted, she turned back.

The women glared at her.

Corandra should have spread the leaves for them. She stomped back to Rusty. "Since I have to stay here, can I at least have digging tools, and dig where I picked up the leaves."

Rusty grunted.

That was unlike her.

Rusty had to be worried about Tanna, or Zella. Tanna wasn't her mother either, though Tanna had raised her. Childbirth was a normal thing. No one had died from it when Robin or Dover had been there. Tanna already had two children, so it shouldn't be a big deal, though she must be older than most women who had newborns.

"Take these." Rusty handed her a piece of metal. "Oh and take the toddler with you please." Rusty pointed to Glenna's son, Zande, digging through one of the sorted buckets and dropping artifacts on the ground.

The old talking piece of plastic hit the ground and started speaking. "Sunshine, come again." These words, and many more it knew. They used to make her laugh, when she was Zande's age. Now she wrinkled her nose and turned away. Why had the ancients had talking boxes? There had been so many people, they could never have met them all, or heard all the stories they had to share.

Arguing would do no good. Maybe the boy could dig for her, at least a little. She held out her hand. "Come on."

The little boy grabbed her hand and held on.

Rusty smiled at him. "How about a ride?" She picked him up and sat him on Ellie's back.

Ellie snorted.

At least she wouldn't have to watch him pick his way through the broken rocks. If he fell and cut himself, Rusty and Glenna would be furious. She carried the tools with her.

One more chore.

Couldn't they leave her alone! Lions might be near, though not too close with the fifty plus people of Shells. And a toddler that wasn't hers. Lion bait.

Beyond the broken rocks, Corandra helped Zande down off Ellie. "Play carefully, and don't wander off!"

The boy laughed and rubbed Ellie's legs.

Ellie swatted him with her tail, and pawed a rock.

Corandra searched the ground for a suitable place to dig. It didn't look as if anyone had ever dug here since Shells had been founded when she and Henry were infants, even younger than Zande.

If she could find something that would be valued, the community might want to keep her. It was worth a try. Perhaps the Goddesses would listen to her plea.

A shallow depression near the broken rocks might hold promise, or at least an easy place to dig. She sat down, flicked her hair onto her back, and pushed aside loose leaves.

Nothing visible on the ground. Her piece of metal would have to do the work. It wasn't much good, and already half rusted through. She raked at the top layer to check for softness.

Zande grabbed sticks nearby and stacked them.

The ground shifted, slowly at first. The more she dug, the more her anger fled. A hand's width down, the piece of metal struck something. Corandra smiled. She really had found something. All by herself, she had found it! She glanced up to see the boy further away. "Come help me dig."

Zande toddled over to her. He helped scrape the dirt away. "Draw?"

"Not now. Tonight at the fire maybe." Adults ignored her drawing with Zande in the ashes by the fire pit. She'd long ago used up all the white rock for drawing pictures on other rocks. Maybe more was buried here, away from the main villa.

A red container, her favorite color. Buried in the ground. If she worked the soil loose enough, it might slide out easy. Maybe she could keep it, if it was undamaged. Especially if she had to leave Shells, she'd need something to carry a little food, water, and a change of clothes. Zella's nutria stew would be a lingering memory soon. The bitter taste of the meat mingled with the sweet flavor of herbs. Even if it wasn't her favorite meal, she'd miss it.

"Stand back."

The boy toddled back to Ellie, who sniffed the container.

Corandra grabbed it, and pulled it out of the ground. As it loosened, it made a swooshing noise as air replaced the container. She placed it on the ground beside the hole. The lid was still intact. The hole had to be filled in before someone fell into it.

Loose rocks would do. Several were nearby. She picked up a few and turned to see the boy had opened the container. How dare he! She had first right to see what was in it.

"Put the lid down!" She ran over to the boy and dropped the rocks in the hole. It would have to do for now. Later, she'd come back and fill it in.

The lid sat sideways on the container. She lifted it. Small bottles of something lined the bottom, surrounded by those little white things that made noise when crunched. She handed a few of the white pieces to the boy. They would keep him busy during the walk back.



## Chapter 3

Rusty waved at Glenna who could now work uninterrupted.

Zande rode Ellie out of Shelpit beside Corandra.

If there were some way Corandra could encourage others, instead of scaring them.

Today wasn't the day to worry about her. Shelpit needed her to guide the diggers and sorters. This pile, the last basket brought to the sort station last night, not even gone though, couldn't hold her interest.

Her hands fell to her side as she stared at the sky. Tanna needed her help. Zella said she was safe. In the back of her mind, she worried. Before both Pamma and Garn were born, her hands had shook, and nightmares returned. Before this birth, the nightmares had been far worse, and even Henry had asked if she was okay.

If the Goddesses Kafa and Amber saved Tanna, she might keep her place in the community. Tanna had helped raise her equally as both second mother, and a sister. Without her, she would only have her brother Henry.

She had to lead the dig at Shelpit, and allow Zella and Ambrena to take care of Tanna. Her hands shook as she dropped the artifacts in them.

Ambrena.

The villa said Ambrena was the memory of Goddess Amber. Though no one ever said a word directly to her, the villa held her, and her words, at double their weight. Rusty almost dared to ask Ambrena if Tanna would survive. Life would change drastically if Tanna died. The Mad Gods might even reawaken, as they had when Tanna had been her age.

Rusty's lips trembled. It wouldn't do for others to see her with teary eyes. Directing the dig kept her busy. Sorting was her favorite part. Today, the piles held nothing they needed. If they could learn the ancestor's secrets of how to make the metals, they could make all the tools they needed. So few had been found. They didn't last long above ground. She had given her best piece to Corandra today.

Morning crept by, as she waited on Ambrena to send someone to report on Tanna.

Corandra and Zande walked back into the clearing.

A red box hung in Ellie's harness.

Rusty drew a deep breath. Red often meant trouble. If anyone else in the group had found it, she wouldn't worry. Zella should be here.

"Glenna, go check on Zella please."

She had to tread carefully. Corandra would snap like a nutria over the littlest things these days.

Glenna hugged her son, and handed him some white crinkly artifacts.

They could be for anything. Zella always said to watch out for them. Sometimes, they were safe. Sometimes, not. Wet ones would make you sick. Dry ones could have been wet once.

Corandra unhooked the box.

"What did you find?" Rusty asked.

"A pretty box. Maybe I can keep it? I don't have one of my own."

"Perhaps Zella will give it to you. What was in it?" Rusty walked over to the box.

Zande toddled to the box as Corandra opened it. He reached in and grabbed a bottle. One of glass. He held it above his head.

Ellie shied away.

The boy dropped the bottle and it burst.

He sat down and touched the liquid.

"Come child," Rusty said. "Stay away from the box."

There had been letters on the bottle. Her heart raced.

"Come on everyone, let's go eat. Glenna will be back with news soon. You too Corandra. No one will disturb the box." Rusty led the boy away, and hoped Corandra followed.

In the shade, the group of miners rested. The boy played. The bottle might not be dangerous after all. Once, when Trapper was still alive, he had opened such a bottle and his skin had burned to an unsightly and painful rash that never went away. Almost at once, his arm was scarred for the last few seasons of his life.

Glenna walked into the clearing with Zella.

"Tanna had a baby girl, and named her Ola," Zella said.

Relief flooded through Rusty. She wouldn't lose the one mother she truly remembered. Zella could never replace Tanna.

"Zande broke some glass in a box Corandra found." Rusty quickly explained what had happened with the bottle.

Zella looked at his hands, concern etched on her face. "He looks okay. Bottles still there?"

Corandra nodded.

"Everyone stay here. Rusty, come with me."

Rusty led Zella over to the red box.

Corandra followed them. "Zella, please let me keep the box. I'll need one when you send me away."

No one Rusty knew wanted to send Corandra away. They wanted her to cooperate with others, and behave normally. She glanced at the younger girl and then focused on the box.

"I need to see it first," Zella said.

No one ever argued with Zella. Or Dover for that matter.

Zella moved the lid to the side and looked at the bottles. She picked up the broken bottle. "Tussis. There has to be more."

She turned the bottled in her hand, and sat it down carefully. The crinkly white artifacts slid around and covered up the bottles. Zella pulled out another bottle and touched the writing. "Letters are faded. Some are missing. 'Typ,' then two unreadable letters, and a 'd.'" Zella turned pale, and pushed the lid aside.

Tension in the air mounted. The breeze stopped, holding a packet of extreme heat around the box and the women.

"Another bottle has the word 'pox' on it." Zella looked up at Rusty. "I'm not sure. The ancestors had bad things to say about pox."

More bottles nestled among the crunchy white artifacts. She moved her hands through them, and counted aloud. "One, two, three, four, there's something else down here."

Her hands moved deep inside the box. Zella glanced at Rusty. "Bring some sun warmed water please, and wipe the sides of the box."

Rusty brought the water and wiped one side of the box. A black triangle with broken corners appeared. Inside the triangle was an arrangement of broken circles. She gasped and looked up to Zella.

Zella stood up and replaced the lid on the box. "Corandra, I need to see where you found this. Rusty, do not go to the villa. Go to the lake and bathe. Take Zande and Corandra with you. I must find Dover. Now."

"Glenna took Zande with her to the villa," Rusty said.

Zella shaded her eyes. "Find her. Send the rest on to the lake. Everyone who had contact with her too."

"What is it?" Rusty asked.

Zella covered the red box. "No idea. Not taking chances. Now go!"

When Zella commanded, no one slowed down. Rusty ran to inform the rest of the miners. She rustled them off down the water

path, and then raced to the villa.

What had the letters meant? Ambrena would know. She mustn't go near her though. Whatever it was might be passed directly to her, Tanna, and baby Ola.

Zella would be angry at her mistakes today.

Brush blocked the path as she ran.

She wanted to scream for Glenna as she reached the villa. That would never do. It would scare her, and everyone else. Her heart beat wildly as she slowed to a fast walk, caught her breath, and walked to the lodge she shared with Glenna. "Glenna?"

No answer.

Rusty checked each lodge toward the center of the villa. One woman said she had seen her following Zande to Tanna's.

Her heart pounded deep in her chest. If Zella knew, what would she do? Rusty had been exposed to whatever was in that crate. Tanna's baby couldn't be exposed. She ran to Tanna's.

Glenna and her son sat outside.

Rusty drew a deep breath, "Who all have you spoken to since coming back to the villa?"

Glenna laughed. "About everyone. Little Ola is so beautiful."

"You've seen her?"

"Most certainly. I always welcome the newborns. Zande was eager to see her."

Rusty hid her head in her hands. "Come on. We have to hurry everyone to go to the lake and bathe quietly."

Tanna stepped into the entryway. "What's wrong?"

Rusty gulped. She looked up to the woman who had raised her, and helped raise her brother. "What is tussis?"

Tanna screamed and covered her mouth.

Robin ran out the entry behind her, and grabbed her as she fell.

"What did you say Rusty?"

"The torn bottle paper said tussis." The faces around her were pale. She was sure the blood had left her face as well.

He grabbed the alarm horn and blew.

Everyone in the villa stopped whatever they were doing and gathered close.

Rusty shrank against the lodge. What could she do? What had she done? If she hadn't let Corandra go off on her own, the box wouldn't have been found. The bottle wouldn't have been broken. It had seemed like the best way to keep her busy and happy, for everyone.

Robin's form wavered through the tears in her eyes.

She wanted to reach out to someone, anyone. Her necklace with the Shells' villa and dig charms banged against her chest.

Henry ran around the corner of the lodge.

Rusty grabbed him, and held on, something stable in her world. She had vowed never to give up on her baby brother. Now she feared for her life, as well as those around her. Their mother's forgotten last words echoed. Henry was the hope of their community.

## Chapter 4

Ola cried the normal sleepy cry of a contented newborn. A little soft perhaps, not unusual for a newborn's first day.

Ambrena tucked the loose rabbit furs around her. A few days experiencing the world, and she would be well and strong.

Outside, Rusty spoke to Glenna.

Tanna stood awkwardly, and walked to the entryway.

Ambrena cooed at Ola, touching her soft cheek. Someday, if she had her own child, maybe her place in Shells would be secure. There was no one in Shells she'd invite to sponsor her first child though. All the men her age were more like her brothers than potential sponsors.

Tanna fell backwards.

Robin ran to her.

Ambrena held Ola close and rushed forward. Tanna didn't scare easily. "What is it?"

When Robin blew the horn, it startled her, and woke Ola to fuss and cry.

Rusty stepped back.

"Go, all of you! Down to Lake Kafa. We must bathe quietly and quickly. Then return to our own lodges and not go out unless we have to," Robin said.

The people listened. They grumbled a little. A break in the water would be nice after listening to the birth of a baby. Washing the summer's dust off, would cheer the children and mothers as well.

"Robin, should we go?" Tanna asked.

Robin watched as word spread through the crowd surrounding their lodge.

Everyone knew the dangers of pit mining. Nothing serious had ever happened before. At least, not as long as Ambrena could remember. They stayed anyway, and most helped all they could. What the scare was, and how it would affect them, Robin would tell her soon, she hoped.

"Remember Trapper. Go quickly," he said. "I'll follow behind with clean furs and clothes."

"I'll carry Ola." Ambrena gathered the newborn in her furs. Tanna rested her hand on Ambrena's shoulder.

The trip to the lake was long and slow. Many passed them on their trek back. They all stopped and waited on Tanna and Ambrena

to pass. Robin stayed behind them.

Lake Kafa, lodge of the Kafa Goddess. Ambrena knew she had seen the Goddess once. Tanna had told the story frequently during ceremonies. The Goddess had not been seen again since that day, though some had noticed giant ripples on the lake's surface when they fished too long on sunny days.

Today, the lake appeared peaceful, though who knew what danger lurked deep beneath the lapping waves. She shivered as she stepped into the shallow area, where people washed their clothes. Anything could hide in here.

Scrubbing didn't take long. The warm water at this end would feel good to Tanna so soon after the baby was born.

Fresh blood trickled down Tanna's leg. Her face turned pale.

Zella glanced at Ambrena, and stepped in front of Tanna, helping her up to the bank.

If the blood loss were too great, Zella would say so. There was nothing she could do until they returned to the lodge anyway.

Back at the villa, Ambrena pulled her bed close to Tanna's. "I'll be here."

"I know," Tanna whispered. "I can't believe what was found."

"It can't be good if Robin is worried."

"Wait until Zella and Rusty return to hear the whole story." Tanna rocked Ola in her arms. "I'll keep her as safe as I can."

Ola closed her eyes and slept.

Tanna's eyes closed.

Ambrena pulled a cover over Tanna and tucked it in. Bright red splattered the beige fur. More blood loss now was not good.

Zella, Rusty, and Robin walked into the lodge, and closed the entry cover.

Rusty sat beside Ambrena and grabbed her hand.

"I sent Henry and Glenna's brother to find Dover. They should be back soon anyway," Robin said.

Tanna tried to lean on one arm. Her eyes fluttered from the strain of the night and day.

"We need light, and we need to talk without everyone hearing." Zella closed the entry.

"You always said no secrets," Tanna said. "We couldn't keep one anyway, not here."

"It's not the secrets. We have to understand the complexity of the situation before we can decide what to do. There are many things those letters could mean. We have to work through our memories to

decide what we think it means. I wish we had the clay tablets my mother had."

"Tanna, can you make the trip back to the lake? I know you are exhausted," Robin said.

"Too far," Tanna said. "We can go to Trapper's. No one can hear us there."

"Sunlight would be nice too," Ambrena said. Flickering firelight made today too spooky. She helped Tanna up.

They walked slowly, so Tanna could lean on Robin.

People peeked out at them from covered entries.

Their friends and neighbors would not be happy with this situation. The leaders shouldn't look like they were abandoning the villa to the consequences of Corandra's find.

She and Zella would have a lot of comforting and explaining to do.

Outside the villa, they sat beside Trapper's old lodge. It had been abandoned after he died a few seasons before. Many young children liked to play in it, almost out of hearing from the rest of the villa. It was too close to the trees for most people to want to live alone there. Though some people would stay a night there once in a while, when they wanted to be alone, or with someone special.

The lodge entry was open. Robin went inside to verify it was empty.

Tanna sat on the ground against the lodge.

A small rock made a seat for Ambrena. Ola slept in her arms.

Zella sighed as she sat down. "I didn't dare draw on bark the letters. The ancestors spoke of many horrors that lay hid behind the symbol on the box. Among them, vials containing illnesses spread through the air. I think we need to go to the Kafa Goddess and ask for appeasement."

Rusty rubbed her eyes. "I thought I did the right thing, by letting Corandra be by herself."

Zella patted her knee. "You couldn't know what she would find. Where is she anyway?"

No one answered. If she had taken the box, she might spread the devastation.

"I'll find her." Rusty stumbled on a tree root as she stood up. Her head hit the side of the lodge.

"Be careful," Zella said.

"Should I go to?" Ambrena said. Perhaps Corandra would listen to her. They had once been close.



"Stay," Tanna said. "I think Rusty should too. We need to understand first."

"I have to find her. I'll check Zella's lodge first." Rusty ran down the deserted path to the lodges.

Ambrena wanted to follow her. Corandra would feel guilty, like she always did after a fight with Henry. This calamity, could permanently affect the whole community.

"I don't remember any tales about tussis," Ambrena said.

"It's not the whole name," Robin said. "In fact, it may be one of many names."

Ola cried as her arms pulled free from her fur covering.

Tanna patted her, trying to comfort her. Blood splattered on her leg.

Robin reached for Tanna's hand, and held it close.

"The paper I've found doesn't say much about them," Zella said. "Red containers like that one can be deadly. And the words weren't fully on the bottles, some had worn partially off."

Robin sifted some sand over a pebble. "I hope Dover returns soon."

He traced the dried blood on Tanna's leg. "I fear it is an infectious disease. Whether its danger is more, less, or the same, after all these gens, even Dover may not know."

"Should we re-bury it?" Ambrena asked.

"Future gens would find it," Robin said. "Then it would affect them. And if anyone like Blake or Orid found it." He shuddered.

Ambrena didn't really remember either one of them. People whispered stories about Blake's death. Those stories were far worse than the villa's fear of either Goddess Kafa, or even Goddess Amber. Zella always promised the Goddesses were there to help them, and direct the lives of those who listened. To hear and share her wishes would give her status, almost equal to Zella's when she was a new adult.

A horse carrying Dover and Henry raced into the clearing. Dover slid off onto the ground. "Take the horse to the herd lodge. Stay there for now."

Henry turned away with the horse.

Robin quickly updated Dover. "I'm not sure which it is."

Dover shook his head. "If it is what I fear, early symptoms would seem typical for late fall illness. Sneezing, cold, wet nose, and runny fluids. Not good. Children could die. Some of us adults too."

"We have to do something." Ambrena clenched her hands.

People couldn't die, not from a broken bottle in a box.

"We will. Tanna and I will prepare a ceremony to appease Goddess Kafa. Now go. Inform everyone to meet at Kafa Sighting before sundown. We will need a bonfire." Zella helped Tanna up, and they went into Trapper's lodge.

Dover left a basket of herbs by the entry.

Waiting until almost sundown would be a long day. At least she could prepare the bonfire pile.

At Kafa Sighting though? People rarely went there. That was the place Goddess Kafa had passed judgment on Blake. She shivered. Visions of that day, and screams flitted through her mind. His screaming body sinking into the gaping mouth in the lake.

It couldn't be real, could it?

It was a horror story mothers told their kids to make them be good. Or was it?

Zella had said Ambrena stood and watched as it happened. The memory could be the result of the stories imprinted on her brain.

"I'll notify people, and be there to help you soon," Robin said. "You okay?"

Ambrena nodded. "I don't want to see Goddess Kafa. I don't remember her."

"Be glad," Dover said. "I hope we don't see her either. Though perhaps seeing her would be for the best. There may be some secret she holds that could save us."

"I hope we don't have to leave Shells. Rusty can't find metal anymore." She looked at him, trying to determine if he realized how dangerous this could be.

Without metal, there would be no strong tools.

No tools would mean no food, either by hunting, or gardening. If this broken bottle didn't kill their villa, starvation could in the next few seasons. Some of the miners, sorters, and even people from the other villas, had begun to complain that they didn't have enough metal for tools. Wood tools would work for a while for some things, like the Tuttle looms. Without metal, the wooden tools couldn't be replaced.

Dover sighed. "I know. I hoped I would die of old age before your little mine ran out."

"Is it really mine?"

He nodded. "You found it, remember?"

Ambrena shook her head. There was so little she remembered from those early seasons. When she tried to remember her mother's

face, a picture of ash and flame, like the fire they cooked by, blocked her memory.

Dover patted her shoulder. He and Robin hurried to the first lodge of the villa.

People stared out of entryways as she hurried back through the villa to the trails leading to the lake. The walk to Kafa Sighting was a long trail, seldom kept up. Brush and brambles grew across it, and tripped her bare feet as she hurried.

Along the way, she stopped by a clearing she went to when she wanted Goddess Amber to hear her. If she listened. Would she really listen to an orphan who couldn't even remember her own mother, or the day her mother died?

The moss covered rock rested between the trees. She sat carefully on it, and looked up to the sky. "Please Goddess Amber, if you hear me, help me, as you helped our ancestors. Please don't be angry and awaken the Mad Gods."

She sat a while longer, enjoying the peace in a place where no one else visited. No sign she had been heard. Then again, peace was expected to be quiet. If Goddess Amber were angry, surely she would let her know by shaking the trees with a mighty wind.

## Chapter 5

Leaves drifted onto Corandra's head.

Ellie snorted nearby.

Zella's face had been pale and drawn as she read the bottle contents.

Corandra knew that look. This wasn't what she should have found. There would be serious consequences for sure. She would be sent from the one villa she had ever known. No one wanted her here.

Sniffing wouldn't help.

Zella glanced at the location where she had found the box. Nearby, the ground remained dry and untouched. She hadn't stayed long.

Corandra called out to her.

Zella didn't answer as she rushed from the clearing.

Her mouth gaped. She stood up and leaned against Ellie. "Will they let me keep you? It doesn't matter. Zella didn't take you away when she left me here. I am going to take you with me. I have to find a few things. Surely, they won't mind me taking a little food. If I hadn't messed up so bad, I might have been welcome at Tuttle, or Alma, if I had any skills."

Ellie stomped her foot.

"You stay here. I'll be back."

Corandra walked through the pathway to Shelpit. It was eerily empty. The sun bounced off the buckets of artifacts that had been dug that day. Two lay tilted on their sides, contents scattered about for birds and small beasts to gather. She should stop and cover them, to protect the villa's hard work.

Picking up one bucket, she filtered through it quickly. Mostly rotten wood, nothing of value to them, or even the wildlife. She dropped the bucket back on the ground, and left it alone. A gentle breeze whisked away the leaves she had placed on the damp soil.

Corandra shivered. Something was wrong. The miners should have returned from the lake.

Brush in the path slowed her progress. Someone had run down the path and knocked several limbs into the pathway. Perhaps she should go back to Ellie now. Corandra took a deep breath and pushed the brush away. She had the right to take her clothes at least. No one else would wear them.

Her heart pounded as she picked up speed. At the entrance to the villa, she stopped. No one was in sight. No children played. Dogs snored beside their lodges. Flying bugs buzzed in the sunshine.

People should be there. The people wouldn't have left their lodges to her. She walked carefully down the path. Entry covers fluttered. Eyes peeked through. No one spoke. A baby cried in the distance.

Corandra ran into the lodge she shared with Zella. No one was there. She pinned the flap back for light and checked her sleeping corner. Her other clothes were behind her bed furs. Food storage was by the entry. Dried nutria, nuts, and a few carrots. It wasn't much. She wrapped a handful, maybe a day's food, in her clothes.

"Please don't go," Rusty said. "We need you." Standing in the entryway, she blocked sunlight, and Corandra's escape. Rusty looked so much like her brother, that even the sight of her made Corandra turn away.

"The whole villa wants me gone, I better go."

Rusty walked in and held out her hand. "Wait. At least until Dover comes. He is meeting with Zella, Tanna, Robin, and Ambrena now."

Corandra sighed. "If I leave now, maybe I can stay at Alma or Tuttle, one night, anyway."

"Please?" Rusty said.

"I don't know why I am the way I am. I have to be strong now. I'll be a roamer. I can't be weak." She tried to pull away.

Rusty stepped on the bundle. "It would be weak to run away from the problem now. You have to stay until we know what it is, and what we can do to fix it."

Corandra pulled back. "I don't want you fixing my problems anymore."

Rusty crossed her arms. "I'm not fixing your problems. You are almost an adult now. Don't run away from your life. You need me, and the whole villa, as much as we need you."

Corandra grabbed at the bundle. "No one acts like it."

The bundle gave way, and Corandra fell backwards holding it.

"There are things you don't know," Rusty said.

"Maybe I need to know them."

The entry cover closed and hid the light.

"Rusty, Corandra, I'm here. We have work to do," Ambrena said.

"I want to leave now," Corandra said.

Ambrena grabbed her shoulder. "This mess is not all your fault. Zande broke the bottle." She released her hold.

"We are going to Kafa Sighting to build a bonfire. No one can leave until after tonight. Understood?"

Corandra nodded and hugged her bundle tighter. "I'm keeping my bundle ready."

"Fine. Now come help us gather wood for the giant bonfire. Everyone else has to stay inside until then. Where is Ellie?"

Corandra tucked her bundle under her furs. "I left her at Shelpit."

"Good. You and Rusty go bring her, and I will meet you at Kafa Sighting."

Ambrena had become so bossy in the last few seasons. Repeating Zella and Tanna's orders. It stung when she did so.

Another day wouldn't make a difference. Corandra flounced out of the lodge and down the path to retrieve Ellie. She and Rusty left Ellie's harness on, and walked her the long way around to Kafa Sighting.

Ellie helped them pull loose wood laying around into a pile. With three young women and a camel, it didn't take too long.

"When will they be here?" Corandra dangled her feet in the lake.

"Before dark." Ambrena set a leaf loose on the water and looked up to Corandra on the bank beside her. "Do you really want to know your past?"

Corandra stared out across the water. "This place bothers me. I know Blake was sacrificed here."

Ambrena took her hand. "Blake's hunters killed Rusty and Henry's mother and sponsor."

"That doesn't have anything to do with me, or why I fight with Henry." Corandra tried to pull away. "My mother was Uden, and Fendon was probably my sponsor. I don't remember either. They weren't related to Blake, were they?"

Ambrena closed her eyes. "Fendon wasn't your sponsor. Uden couldn't bare the sight of you when you grew to look like the man she feared."

"No. Don't say I'm a rattler." Corandra pulled her hands away. The law said she should never have lived to see daylight if that were true.

Ambrena grabbed her hands. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "It is true. Uden and Fendon left together. They come back every Spring Trade to check on you. Your mother wanted the best for you. She thought if she left, the villa could raise you to be okay, and not be

like Blake, more like Jorn."

Jorn was a rattler who had been raised as Zella's brother. He had left to join Uden and Fendon. A nice enough person, at least in villa lore. "Does Rusty know?" Corandra tried to breathe and remain upright.

"I think so," Ambrena said. "She should know. She is older than me, and was there when Uden was confronted. Does she remember? Difficult to say."

Ambrena shook Corandra's arms. "Rusty cares about you, as does Henry. We want you to stay. I remember wanting to bring you with me to Tanna and Robin's before Garn was born. Zella and Dover thought it might be better to raise you and Henry together."

Corandra turned to the lake. "I should be out there, shouldn't I?"

"No." Ambrena said. "Come on. You've always been a little sister to me, and I don't want you to leave. I'd worry, not knowing where you are."

"Or what trouble I am causing?"

"That to. The villa will be here soon. Dry your tears and stay a while. You will find your place in the villa life flow."

The lake sparkled as her tears dried. Deep shadows filled the beach area. Soon, people arrived and the area around the prepared bonfire became crowded.

Corandra tried to stay on the outside of the crowd.

They kept pushing her to the middle.

As dusk turned into darkness, Tanna and Zella arrived.

Together, they lit the bonfire.

It shimmered on the lake.

Tanna stood before the bonfire, facing the lake. "Goddess Kafa, we ask for your protection from this unknown artifact from the ancestors."

A splash echoed through the stillness. Everyone turned, though nothing was visible on the lake. People shuffled closer to the bonfire.

Zella waited with her arms raised high above her head. "Shall we stay here and wait?"

No sound, other than Ola softly murmuring.

Corandra stepped closer to the lake.

Could she see the Goddess?

Zella's voice droned behind her.

Would her sponsor's spirit be in the lake? Perhaps that was why she had such a bad temper, not because of who he was. He was here, influencing her, knowing she was his child. Maybe, if she

found Uden and Fendon, they would tell her it wasn't true. Or, if Jorn were still alive and with them, maybe he could help her. Where were they, anyway?

Corandra slipped into the water and pushed off from the cliff edge under the tree. If the Goddess still existed, she would find her, and find a solution to save her, and her villa.



## Chapter 6

The bonfire burned low. People became restless.

Rusty stood up with the flames behind her. "Robin and Dover have decided. We must use caution. Tonight, stay in your own lodges. Tomorrow back to normal routines, with one exception. No one can travel or trade with the other villas until we are sure no one is sick. There will be no mining tomorrow."

"How long will it take?" Glenna held Zande close.

Dover and Zella didn't know.

Rusty reached out and touched Zande's dangling foot. "Zella, Dover, or Ambrena will check with each of you every day until they decide it's safe."

Sparks flew as Ambrena stirred the bonfire.

"Ambrena doesn't know enough." Someone shouted.

Voices murmured.

"Ambrena knows enough. She will tell us immediately if she is concerned, and we will visit you ourselves." Dover waved his arms and the smoke from the bonfire trailed them.

More people murmured. "What are we looking out for?"

Zella covered her eyes. "I wish I knew. Coughing, cold, sneezing, anything that lasts longer than normal for fall weather. Find us as soon as you recognize symptoms."

"What are you doing with the rest of the box?" Glenna asked.

"What about Corandra? Is she okay?"

"Isn't she the cause of the trouble as usual?" One of the gen three men said.

Dover held his hand up. "The box and Corandra will be dealt with after we determine if anyone becomes sick. For now, please don't blame Corandra. She found the box. She didn't break the bottle."

The ceremony continued with Dover, Zella, Tanna, and Ambrena speaking for the villa to the Kafa Goddess.

The fire flared again. Ambrena stepped toward the villa, raised her arms, and asked Goddess Amber to watch over them.

The people murmured as they tromped back to their lodges.

Rusty stayed behind with Zella to put out the fire.

"You sure?" Zella said.

"Corandra slipped into the water a while ago. I hope she didn't hear the comment about her. I have to find her. I'll bring her back to your lodge, and we'll stay there." Rusty lugged a bucket of water

from the lake.

Zella dumped the bucket on the remaining embers. Sparks flew into the night air. "I'll finish here. You find her."

Rusty plucked a still lit branch from the embers. Finding Corandra in the dark, and their way back would be scary. No stars or moon were out, and the branches blocked the light from the villa fire pits. A thick bank of clouds threatened rain. Mining in the morning would be impossible, no problem since they couldn't leave their lodges anyway. Of course, rain had been withheld so long, everyone would be thankful.

Her heart beat louder. Corandra wasn't scared enough to offer herself to Goddess Kafa was she?

Rusty ran down the path beside the lake. "Corandra, where are you?" She stumbled and the light on the branch fizzled out. Darkness descended. Frogs croaked and small animals slithered and slid in the leaf litter by the lake. Shivers ran up her spine. Alone in the dark, even this close to the villa she could step on a snake, or be attacked by a night hunter.

"Corandra, my light went out. Where are you?" Rusty scrambled to her feet and walked to a log she'd seen before tripping.

Something crashed behind her.

"I can't find her sis."

"Henry, what are you doing?"

"I came back to look for you, and Zella sent me afterwards."

"You don't have a torch."

Henry took her hand. "I can see enough. She's not here. I know where she hides."

He led Rusty back into the brush, and halfway to where the people gathered water, and washed clothes.

"Stay," he whispered.

Rusty waited.

"Corandra, come out please," Henry said.

Leaves rustled nearby. "They don't want me. I have to go."

"Not tonight. You can't travel at night. Dover said no one can leave until we are sure there is no sickness."

"Did you come alone?"

"No. Rusty is here. She needs your help."

"I don't want to dig, or sort. I don't want anything to do with any of it, ever again!"

More leaves rustled.

"It's okay Corandra. I don't think anyone will be digging or sorting

tomorrow. Stars are cloud covered. Let's go to Zella's lodge, please."

A muffled reply followed. Leaves and branches broke.

"Here Corandra, take Rusty's hand, and lead us."

The trail Corandra led them down was narrow. Bushes poked out and grabbed at hands and legs. Nothing at eye level at least. The darkness felt darker than any Rusty remembered. This trail of Corandra's didn't sparkle with stones like the main lake trail did. If she had placed any here, there wasn't enough starlight filtering through the overgrowth to make them twinkle tonight.

Back at the villa, all was silent. Henry stopped at Tanna's lodge. "I'll miss hunting for the next few days."

"Dover should let you go, if you don't go near the other villas," Rusty said.

"No," Henry said. "Almond and Tuttle will be hunting near our usual hunting grounds for a few days. We usually overlap for safety."

Rusty touched her brother's arm. "So, they depend on you to be there?"

"Not exactly. Occasionally we help each other. We look out for each other. They'll know something is wrong if we aren't there tomorrow. I'll ask to mark the isolation stones." He lowered his head, and pushed aside the entry cover.

Hunting was Henry's skill. He was so close to the animals, and so good at catching them for food, clothing, and tools. It was almost as if the animals gave themselves to him so the community could survive. Even the other hunters admired his skill. His adulthood necklace would have the teeth of his first kill, a tiger.

Rusty cared less for hunting animals, and more for hunting ancestral artifacts. Someday, she would find what she was looking for. That elusive something that would mean so much to the community. The thought of Blake's talking plastic piece was always on her mind. Taunting her, teasing her. It was important, and Zella knew it. Nearly every day at Shelpit, she had to hold the piece, and listen to it talk. Whatever that secret was, she had to find it.

She held Corandra's hand as they passed more lodges. At the lodge she shared with Glenna, she paused. "I'm going with you," Rusty said to Corandra. Glenna would have to forgive her tonight. If Zande cried for her, she would know where to find her.

"Don't you know what Ambrena said about me, and my sponsor? Does Henry know?"

Rusty closed her eyes. "Zella told me the story once, in case I ever needed to know. I don't think Henry knows. Everyone wanted to give you a chance without a ghost hanging over your head."

"Do you think that's what it is? An evil ghost?" Corandra turned to stare at her.

Rusty took both of Corandra's hands. "We all have good and evil inside us. It's how we use both, and the power that comes with both, that matters. Occasionally, the power that comes with evil can do great things and save lives. Often, the fear of hurting anyone, or anything, that comes with the good, prevents people from standing up to bad evil."

"I've never heard of good evil." Corandra laughed.

"Sure you have. You, me, Henry, this whole villa." Rusty hugged her and laughed. She waved her arm to encompass all the lodges. "Without the evil of your sponsor, none of us would have existed."

Corandra turned to her. "He killed your mother and sponsor."

Rusty nodded, a tear on her cheek. "And he brought them together. Ambrena didn't mention that part, did she?" She pulled them toward Zella's lodge as she told the story of Orid burning original Shells, and moving the villa to the south side of Lake Kafa so they could secretly mine Klapit. The capture of her trader sponsor from Mills, she knew less about, so it was tacked on almost as an afterthought. Someday, she'd have to ask Zella for more of the story. There had to be more that she knew, since she was there at his death.

Corandra hugged her. "Have you ever been there?"

"No," Rusty said. "Neither first Shells or Mills. I don't remember second Shells. I'm not a traveler. Henry is more interested in traveling than I am. He'll find them on one of the long-term hunts he likes to go on. Let's go to sleep before the rain comes."

Morning dawned misty and cool. Rusty rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, unsure of where she was.

Corandra snored beside her.

She wasn't like Zande, or Glenna, reaching out to hold her hand in sleep. They'd miss her this morning, almost as much as she'd miss them. It was nice to share a quiet lodge with Glenna.

Zella was by the fire, heating water for tea. "Several of the people have already been by this morning."

Rusty moved closer and sat beside Zella. She glanced back at Corandra.

Zella shook her head. "Some think we should move to Westpit now. Others think we should go back to Klapit."

Rusty closed her eyes as she took the tea Zella handed her. "This is the only villa so many know. We couldn't go now."

"No, we couldn't move with winter coming on. We could send scouts though. It might keep people's minds busy." Zella watched her and waited.

The tea was too hot to sip. Cloudy memories of her mother attacked by several roamers crowded her mind. "No Zella, I can't go to Klapit. Westpit is no better. You must leave me here, or train others for those two places."

"Many have been born, and many have died, since you last saw Klapit. You rarely visit the other villas, even Almond, the one you saved."

Images of those trips, and Corandra's mother, Uden, played before her eyes. The fear, the anger, those roamers, and what they had done to so many. Glenna never spoke of those days either. Had they hurt her? She had been afraid to ask. Even as they protected each other, they never spoke of those days, or the night of the attack on Orid and his followers. Rusty's hands shook until the tea spilled.

Zella steadied her hands. "The advice you gave Corandra last night applies to you as well. Don't be afraid to do what you would advise another."

Rusty glanced up. She didn't think anyone had heard their conversation. "I'll try. Do you think we should go to Shelpit today?"

"Take Corandra with you, and choose two people who you think could learn. We need to split the villas up anyway. They are all well over thirty people again. Perhaps enough for two new villas." Zella leaned back and glanced at Corandra.

Corandra sat up. "I don't want to go."

"You can help sort people instead of artifacts."

Zella closed the pouch where Rusty knew she kept secret projects. One she didn't want Corandra to see. Perhaps she had figured out Corandra's role; and knew what her charm should be next spring. If Corandra didn't mess up things worse than she already had.

Corandra sighed. "If I must."

Zella raised her eyebrow. "What? You want to sit here and stare at the walls all day? Go, and take Ellie with you. She needs to stretch her legs."

Rusty tried to not laugh. Zella was right. Corandra facing Shelpit and the miners again after yesterday would be difficult for her, and worse, the longer she put it off. Rusty would have to face Klapit. It had been abandoned so long, it wouldn't look the same. There might be nothing left of the horrors she had known, if the bison, camels, and horses had stampeded through the abandoned lodges. At least Zella hadn't asked her to go alone.

# Chapter 7

People moved through Shells quieter than usual. Few words were spoken. Children walked instead of ran. Dogs barked less. Even the chickens pecked calmer than normal.

Ambrena watched and waited, as did everyone.

Dover and Robin recited all the old lore they could remember. Most of the stories about illness revolved around fights and battles of their ancestors. Some of the knowledge didn't seem important for this illness, like wound care. Others, told of instant onset illnesses that caused massive pain, scarring, and death, like Trapper had faced. Old tales filled the evening. They repeated them so they wouldn't be forgotten.

Restlessness settled in. People realized their lodges had not been prepared for winter. Stacked sticks and twigs towered next to the treasury. Dried thatch was outside the villa limits, and had not been cut. Fish hadn't been caught and stored along with the garden produce. Fresh meat was running out. The hunters were eager to track a herd, any herd, at this point. So far, no sign of illness out of the ordinary boredom from lack of normal activity.

The weather had been dreary and misty for days. A few people sniffled, normal enough in damp conditions. Today, even before making her morning rounds, Ambrena gathered herbs for tea. Hot tea could work wonders for sniffles. If Dover let the hunters leave soon, they'd need supplies in case of any accidents.

Corandra sat near the lodge she shared with Zella. At least she had calmed down some and joined in the work.

"Want to come with me?" Ambrena swung her collecting basket on her arm like a little girl.

"Sure." Corandra dumped the pile of grass she had been weaving on the ground.

The herb garden was near the edge of the main, long dried up garden. If there were little rain again next growing season, they'd have to move it closer to the lake. It would mean a lot of work clearing brush from rarely used areas. They'd have a late start and a weak growing season. Tame and wild nutria would also be more apt to steal from gardens next to the lake. They'd have to keep a guard nearby so they wouldn't lose food.

Corandra dug a few blackberry roots. "Dover said he might send teams out to Klapit and Westpit today. With horses of course. They

won't be gone more than a day or two."

He must not be too worried then. Maybe the danger was past.

"What about the hunters?" Ambrena arranged bee balm flowers and mint leaves in her basket. She'd gather some stems later.

A dandelion stem dangled from Corandra's mouth. "It'll give them something to do, and the rest of us will be busy preparing for their return. If they go west, the other villas won't meet them."

"And no multi-villa hunt this fall." Ambrena arranged her basket on her hip, and walked toward the villa.

Corandra pulled up her basket. "I'll go with them, if they will let me."

"Do you want to learn to hunt?"

"I'm no good at anything else," Corandra said.

She had to think fast. Corandra had to be good at something. What, other than fighting with Henry? "You keep us lively. Without you, we would all lead boring lives."

Corandra laughed dryly. "Maybe boring is good, at least for most people. Hunting is the one skill I haven't tried. Ask Tanna to let me go, please."

Ambrena paused outside the villa. "What part of your cycle are you on? No woman should hunt in the few days before, during, or after."

"I intend to hunt more than half of each season!" A root dropped from Corandra's hand, and rolled along the ground.

"That's why not many women hunt. You may be gone for days during some of the hunts. You can practice."

Henry wouldn't want Corandra to join him in hunting on a regular basis. "Perhaps. Yes. Perhaps hunters who are always in, or near, the villa would be helpful. Go ask Tanna while I take the herbs to Robin to prepare." Her younger friend, so like a sister, pouted all the way back to the villa. The girl's thoughts and feelings scrawled across her drooped shoulders and scowling face.

"Tanna has to let me try." Corandra dropped her basket at Robin's feet and ran back to the lodge. Several leaves hit the ground. A breeze picked them up and scattered them around the villa.

"Something new?" Robin picked up Corandra's basket and walked into the treasury.

Ambrena nodded. "I hope Tanna says yes. Though, I don't think she is ready to go on a hunt. Corandra needs to practice and have a weapon first. Do you think Henry will want her along?" She strung



up a few of the flowers to dry on the rack near the fire.

Robin chuckled. "Somehow, I think it would be okay. Something about those two reminds me of some forgotten story I should remember from the gen four grandmother's tales. Some tale of two young adults who shouldn't be together, and yet, they must. Leave your basket and I'll finish here." He took the basket from her hands.

"I need to take a little mint for Glenna. Thanks." Ambrena pulled some dried mint sprigs from the Treasury rafters.

She hurried to check three lodges with small children. At the first two, the children played outside on the damp ground. No dust would be stirred up in play today. The mothers were glad to see her, and reported no illness.

Glenna's entry was pinned open.

"Hi Glenna, how are you?"

"I'm okay. Not sure about Zande. He's coughing." Glenna stepped into the entry.

Ambrena pushed past her and settled next to the boy on his sleeping mat.

Zande's head felt a little warm. Of course, he was beside the fire. "Any other symptoms?"

A rag stained with nose fluids lay beside the boy.

"A runny nose. Nothing uncommon with the dreary weather, I suppose."

Ambrena wasn't so sure. Her friend didn't need to be worried, not yet, anyway. "Here make him some tea." She handed Glenna the dried mint leaves.

"Come on Zande, sit over here by me." Ambrena adjusted the furs around his shoulders.

Zande crawled next to her and leaned against her shoulder.

His movements seemed slower than normal. It might be nothing. Dover needed to check him. If she could catch him before he sent the teams off, it would be best.

"Zande, could you stay here, away from the fire until I come back? I promise I'll be back as soon as I find Dover. I need to make sure the teams he is sending out have fresh tea leaves before they go."

Zande nodded.

He always talked and laughed. In fact, she couldn't remember him this silent since he was born. Her throat constricted. It had been many days. Surely too long for an illness to strike now.

Glenna looked up from the fire. Worry lines formed on her

forehead.

Ambrena didn't know what to say. No one was sure what that bottle had contained. Zande had been the one to hold it longest, before he broke it all over his hand.

She stood up carefully, and covered the boy.

"Wouldn't he be warmer by the fire?" Glenna stirred the simmering water.

Zande whispered something.

Ambrena didn't want Glenna to hear. It might have been the word "hot." She swallowed. "Your fire always burns warm and bright Glenna. A light to welcome us all. From the side over here, he can watch the flames dance more clearly."

A smile flickered off as fast as it flashed on. Zande coughed again.

That wasn't the cough of a cold.

Lines on his face deepened in the fire's flickering light.

Ambrena tried to control her shaking hands. She had to move slowly until out of Glenna's sight so as not to worry her. Outside, she broke into a run. Dover would be at the horse lodges with Rusty, and those leaving. Branches slapped her face as she ran along the trail to the herd lodge.

When she reached the herd lodge, she was out of breath.

Dover was alone. Several horses gone already.

"Dover, go to Glenna." She panted. Running this distance shouldn't make her out breath. It must be the worry.

He turned to her. "What is it?"

"Zande's hot, and coughing a strange way. You said he might be sick first."

Dover covered his eyes. "You left tea?"

Ambrena nodded.

"I wish we remembered what our ancestors knew." Dover touched her hand, and they rushed back to the villa.

At Glenna's lodge, they paused outside before calling for her.

Dover took a deep breath and walked in at Glenna's response.

"You forgot your basket," Glenna said.

Ambrena nodded. "So Dover had to come back with me to collect the needed tea leaves for the teams." Lying wasn't something she was good at. Omitting that the teams were already gone, she could do. After all, if the teams really needed the tea, runners could catch them.

Dover walked through the maze of Glenna and Rusty's

belongings to Zande along the wall. He glanced up at Ambrena as he felt the child's forehead. A tiny nod was enough to let Ambrena know she was right.

A lump in her throat threatened tears.

"How are you feeling?" Dover asked Zande.

"Wanna sleep." He leaned up against Dover.

Dover pushed him back at arm's length. "You sleep then. Be sure and drink plenty of tea. Glenna step outside with me."

Glenna's face paled.

Ambrena waited near the entry.

Zande curled up in a tight ball, coughed, and covered his head.

"Any other symptoms, in him, or you?"

"No. Cold weather stuff. Runny fluids from the nose, eyes, and bottom. They go together. Don't they?"

"Yes. Often they do. Don't keep him too close to the fire. Find me if anything changes."

Glenna stepped in the entry.

"And don't leave him alone. I'll send someone to stay with you if you like. Rusty will be gone a few days."

The shock on Glenna's face scared Ambrena. "Do you want me to stay?"

"You have too much to do. Go. Zande and I will be fine until Rusty returns." Glenna's arms dangled by her side. She tried to pick up a dish she had been cleaning. It fell into her lap, uncleaned.

Ambrena closed her eyes. Zande was already sound asleep. Normally, he bounced around underfoot laughing, singing, and dancing. There were no words of comfort for her friend. She touched Glenna's shoulder, picked up her basket of herbs, and hurried outside.

Her thoughts tumbled as they hurried to Tanna's lodge. "I can't do it. If you can't do anything, what is the point of my visiting them?"

"Comfort. That is all we can offer. Comfort and tea. If only."

Dover squeezed her hand as his words trailed off. "Zella, you here?"

"Come in."

He opened the entry. "How is Ola?"

Furs covered the gathering baskets bench. Ambrena lifted her basket to a higher shelf and covered it, so the wind wouldn't blow the leaves away.

Zella glanced up from stringing beads for an infant naming necklace. "She's okay. A little cough and runny nose. Tanna decided to visit Shelpit, since Rusty went to Klapit."

Dover picked up the infant and checked her forehead and ears. "She has a fever too."

"Too? She's too close to the fire." Zella's hands fell to her lap. A bead rolled off onto the floor.

Dover closed his eyes and nodded. "Move her to the wall, and we'll see."

"Don't you both have more to do than watch a grandmother care for her baby granddaughter?" Zella looked from Dover to Ambrena and back.

"Zande is sick." Ambrena sank into the pile of furs next to the fire.

Another bead rolled across the floor and into the fire. Zella covered her mouth and ignored the fire devouring the day's work in the bead. "Bad?"

Ola coughed a dainty cough, not the rasping cough Zande had.

Ambrena nodded. Maybe Ola had a normal cough and would be okay.

"There's nothing we can do." Dover picked up another stray bead and covered his eyes. "Our ancestors had to know something about this illness. They knew so much. If we had kept the useful knowledge, and lost the dangerous, we'd know the answer."

"They must have been intertwined somehow. Rusty saved us once before. She can now." Zella folded the necklace and beads into a fur pouch.

Stray beads scattered on the floor, and one gone. Normally, Zella would be angry if work, and precious items, were destroyed. Unless, she thought the Goddess would be appeased by the loss of a bead.

Dover checked Ola's head and closed his eyes. "We can't let her go by herself. This illness could be anything, or nothing."

Ambrena gulped. "I could go with her when she comes back, if Zande isn't better. You know more than I do. You have to stay and take care of them."

The fire crackled. A log sputtered out. Zella and Dover looked at each other, not acknowledging Ambrena, or Ola. A secret conference, using their own private hand and eye gestures.

"No. We haven't heard from Mills, and they don't even know Rusty exists. And where else would they go? None of the Pit Miners know more than we do," Zella said.

"I wasn't thinking of Mills. Brael is trying some new herbs. She may have learned something new. They have more contact with

roamers than we do. We have to try something," Dover said.

"If Jorn were here." Zella said.

Jorn had left with Uden and Fendon long ago. When they visited the Shims' villa every Spring Trade to hear about Corandra, he stayed away. He always sent a message and new furs to Zella through them.

Ola gurgled a watery newborn sound.

Staying here meant watching people she had always known become sick. Some would live. Some may die. Winter was coming, and travel couldn't occur then. A decision had to be made soon.

Tanna walked in.

A least for now, there would be no more talk of anyone leaving. Ambrena didn't want to leave, and didn't think anyone else would either.

Dover had kept everyone in the villa close, in case the potential sickness could be carried to their neighbors. Henry had set up the stones, informing travelers that something dangerous was in the villa. If he was talking about sending people out, he was really concerned.

## Chapter 8

Another chance. This might be her last. Tanna had agreed that Corandra could learn to hunt. Not this hunt, of course. She had to learn to set snares, and practice throwing a spear first. At least she knew what vines from the shriveled garden would produce good snares. Henry had taught her that much the previous fall. Now, he would teach her how to braid the snares for different animals.

The garden was a dried mess. It had bloomed well early in the spring. Occasionally, there would be a second planting. It had been too dry this summer. The tubs used to water the few remaining squash plants were barely damp from the dew and mist.

Vines draped across her shoulder. Squash plants were bare and turning brown, no flowers visible. None. Way too late in the season, and it had been dry too long. Every spring and fall the garden grew and died. They replanted new growth, and sometimes cut down a few encroaching trees to add a little space.

Was she the wildwood that needed removing? Henry had always bickered with her. Often he had stood up to others when they wanted to inform Zella of their fights. If he didn't know the history of their sponsors, it was strange. If he did know, it was even stranger.

Corandra picked up a dead strand of bean plant and twirled it around. No one could understand what went on in her mind. Her mind knew the right thing to say. So often, the wrong thing came out. Rusty's challenge, to use her bad, for something good, meant she still cared about her.

The herd lodge with Ellie waiting wasn't far off. Her feet found their own way there as she thought through the last several days.

Ellie snorted a warm welcome.

She climbed on her back. Pointing her toward the villa, Corandra rode along, lost deep in thought. The path was quiet, as many were at Shelpit today, or at the lake washing clothes. Dover and Glenna stood outside her lodge.

Corandra heard his words to her.

If Zande were sick, and Dover wanted to send help to Glenna, it was all her fault for asking to dig away from the pit in the first place. Everyone would blame her if this illness killed him. Zella hadn't said much in front of her about it. However, she had heard whispered conversations between Rusty and Ambrena. The people in the villa feared her, and the potential unknown illness.

She followed Dover and Ambrena back to Tanna's and listened to them talk. Newborn Ola might be sick too.

Corandra lowered her head. If the ghost of her sponsor was causing her to make mistakes, she'd find that ghost and have her say. There was no reason to punish Zande for her actions! She slapped Ellie on the rump and raced to Kafa Sighting.

The Kafa Goddess should take her, as she had taken Blake. Then, perhaps, everyone could live. None of the people of Shells deserved to die for her mistakes. The best way to make it right was to disappear for good. Maybe the Goddess would forgive her, and let the villa prosper once again.

She reached the watered bonfire. Only a few broken branches had been disturbed. Nutria prints were in the damp charcoal.

The lake ahead was dark, and calm. No sign of movement. She had gone in here before, and the Goddess hadn't answered. Perhaps she needed to go in on the other side. Someone might try to stop her if she went back for clothes. If the Goddess took her, she wouldn't need them anyway.

A tear slipped down her cheek. Corandra slid off of Ellie and walked down to the lake. No bugs roamed on the surface. The water was cold. Here, it tasted like mud. This wasn't the place.

She climbed back on Ellie. One glance back to the villa, and she broke a new path in the opposite direction.

Something good out of something bad. She'd find it.

"Corandra? Where are you?" Henry's voice was low, and far behind her.

She had to hurry. He mustn't know she had been here. He couldn't follow and try to save her. She wanted to save him, and the villa, where she couldn't live, ever again.

## Chapter 9

The horse beneath Rusty was a three gens descendant of the Grandmother's Sandy rescued by Tanna. Gentle when working Shelpit, she pawed and sniffed the ground. All the horses sensed something was different. They hadn't worked, or been out of the herd lodge, for days.

Both pit search teams would leave this morning. Westpit would be explored by those who remembered how to find the place. Which meant they would suffer as much as she would. One of the women going to Westpit was the mother of the girl Tanna and Robin couldn't save. The woman sat tall and firm on horseback. Tears trickled down her face as she led the horse out the entry.

If the girl's mother could make the trip, so could Rusty. She held her head high, and tried to calm the horse beneath her. Out of the entry at last, she glanced back at Dover before going to the front of the group she would lead to Klapit.

The ride should be short. The residents of second Shells used to walk to Klapit daily. Third Shells, where they lived now, was out of sight of the abandoned and burnt second Shells. First Shells location was long forgotten, and several day's walk away.

She followed the Tuttle trail to the midway point, and then turned down the Almond trail for a short distance, before a rarely used track turned off alone. Rusty hoped she could remember the way. She had never dreamed of going back there for anything. And now, that was the one place she must go.

The horses jounced along.

An isolation trail marker stood tall over the Grass Sea. It would be left in place, and they hoped to meet no one, so the illness wouldn't spread. This morning, Zella had asked Dover if they could remove the markers. No sign of sickness had occurred. However, he wanted to wait, in case the illness lurked in their bodies, or the air.

Rusty didn't want to wait. To worry about her mistakes, and the consequences. She had allowed Corandra to go off by herself, and even asked her to take Zande. By taking him, she wouldn't run off and pout like she often did. Zande had been her hope Corandra wouldn't be hurt doing something foolish. Rusty covered her eyes. It was too late to review the past. She must pay attention to the trail.

Almond trail marker loomed ahead.

Rusty stopped. She hadn't gone this way since she Gel, Kleal,



and Uden had brought her and infant Henry to new Shells long ago. Perhaps that too had been a mistake. She and Henry should have faced the past long before now. Others had returned to remember what had happened, and continued on with their lives safely. If Henry hadn't been here on his own, she'd need to convince him to come with her another day.

Her three companions waited, bunched up behind her. Zella had probably told one of them to take control if she couldn't do it.

She would do it. A catch in her throat prevented her from giving the vocal turn signal. They would follow a hand signal.

No trail marker would show the way to Klapit. Those who didn't know where it was could rediscover it someday, when the ghosts of the dead were long gone. Rusty slowed the horse when she thought she was close to the path.

Brush on the right side showed recent disentanglement. A smile fluttered at her lips. Dover must have come, or sent someone, to open the path. He'd make it possible for her to complete the trip to Klapit. Her shoulders drooped. Shells could ask her to leave, since she had been the dig leader. Especially since the dig pit was now empty of useful artifacts. To remain in her villa, she'd have to prove she wouldn't make the same mistake again. And perhaps find a new skill.

"On to Klapit," her voice cracked. Her arm lowered, and she turned the horse down the track.

The opening had been clearly marked. More than a few horse lengths in, and it no longer was. She picked her way through the brush and brambles. A clearing soon spread out before her. Rusty called a halt, and a meal. Going onward would wait. Lions or bison could be about off the paths, and they'd need to listen to the environment before revealing themselves.

The horses grazed nearby while they ate.

"What do you think we will find?" Myrya asked.

Rusty glanced toward where Klapit should be. Tall grass blocked their view. "Do you remember it?"

Myrya shook her head and sat her wooden platter down. "Not really. Like you, I tried to forget. I'm older than you, I think."

"I've never been here," Imel said. "I was a roamer taken in by Almond before it happened."

"Nin?" Rusty said.

Nin stared toward their destination. "I was here. I know where the Webbel villa was, and the dig lodge." She shivered in the late fall

sunshine.

If lions were around, the horses would be pawing and snorting, trying to encourage the group to leave.

Rusty took a deep breath. "Well, guess we better go. The horses aren't nervous."

Her horse settled comfortably as they walked forward.

"Nin, can you walk beside me and point the way. Finding the overgrown lodges will be difficult after all this time." The main Webbel villa had been a day's walk away. They had kept a secret small villa outpost here.

Nin rode up beside her. "There weren't many lodges. They should be over there." She pointed to where several brushy trees towered over the open space. The trees could hide many animals. Someone had even reported a troop of chimps might have made the abandoned villa their lodge once everyone moved to Shells, or the other villas. Travelers occasionally saw them, and remained quiet as they passed to not disturb them.

Her horse skittered to the side.

Rusty pulled her up and glanced back, bringing the horse around to a hissing sound from an unusual hole in the ground.

Three little heads, similar to prairie dogs, darted in and out of the hole, hissing at the horse. Laughing she pulled away. Ground cats. Almost the same as prairie dogs. They didn't share territories. Ground cat holes were more visible, and a horse, or person, would see them before stumbling into one.

As they approached the trees, they listened for the sound of chimps. Tall grass rustled as something ran for the brushy trees. Screams and squeals sounded overhead. They echoed all around.

Rusty couldn't determine where all the sounds came from.

"We have to go on, try not to spook them."

"I think they've spooked me," Myrya said.

Rusty laughed. "They are scary. Did Webbel bring them here?"

"I don't think so. I don't think Blake, or the Webbel leaders, cared much for living creatures." Nin said.

"Back east, people kept them as pets, and let them do some of the work, like harvesting in trees," Imel said.

"We can reach the tops of most trees," Rusty said.

Imel laughed. "Not back east. On the mountains, trees grow so tall, the tops are almost invisible. Everyone in Shells could stretch out in a straight line and still not be as long as a tree is tall."

Trees that tall would not be nice, or safe in stormy weather.

"What could possibly grow in such a tall tree worth harvesting?"

"Leaves and branches for fires. Seeds for food and beads. Some fruit trees are taller than people. Harvesting them with helpers makes it easier, though you have to share with the animals too." Imel hooted to the chimp troop.

Sudden silence washed across the open space.

Rusty turned to him. "What did you say to them?"

"Like us, they have dialects. I tried to say, 'relax, friends.'"

The chimps threw branches and small rocks at them.

"I don't think they understood you." Rusty pulled her horse away.

"Let's go on to Klapit. If they follow, maybe they'll see we mean no harm."

"They'll sure raise the alarm if lions are nearby," Myrya said.

They passed by the remains of the former secret villa. Lodges tilted to the side, wood rotted through. Birds took flight. Rodents scurried for cover. No one had wanted to take the wood or straw from here. The ghosts of the dead were sure to follow any who did. Had it been long enough for the ghosts to have found comfort and a new lodge? A scream from the chimps sounded much as Rusty would expect a ghost to sound.

Nin stopped. Tears rolled down her face.

Chimps screamed at them in the background.

"It sounds almost like those nights long ago. I never wanted to hear the screams of the dead and dying women again."

Nin turned back to the chimps. "Hush my little ones, hush, and let it be. Hush my little ones, let's sleep through the noisy."

She sniffled and clutched the horse's mane. "That's what I used to sing to the babies as men hurt their mothers. Always afraid I'd be next. What else could I do?"

The look on her face made Rusty turn away. Her own mother had been one of those women. Had Nin sang to her and Henry? She didn't dare ask. Memories of those days were far more painful than the damage Corandra had created for the villa. She lowered her head to allow Nin to compose herself.

Nin wiped her eyes and looked beyond the tattered remains in the direction of Shells.

"I should have come back before now. Alone. I'm going on. Wonder if the dig lodge is still there?" Nin attempted a weak smile and faced where Klapit may have been.

Rusty waited. The dig lodge. Her sponsor had been held captive there. Her mother had died in a field not far away. Could she face it?

She gulped and took a deep breath. She sped the horse up. One way to know.

The chattering ceased behind them as they trotted on to Klapit.

They passed a large open bison hollow. The scar Zella had talked about was just beyond. Open pits, never filled. Beyond, sat the dig lodge, wooden boards hung loosely over the abandoned entry.

Rusty slid off the horse. Alone was best. If tears did slide down her cheeks, no one would know. They would see her strength, and not her fear.

Nin and Myrya grabbed her arms. "We'll go together."

Rusty's throat was too tight to tell them no.

They walked to the dig lodge.

The mostly open entry welcomed them to semi darkness. The open windsun on the other side allowed a little light in as well. In the center of the room was an open pit, with a pole tilted out toward the entry. The remains of the ladder Zella had used to bring her sponsor, and the other unknown man, out. The other man had recovered, and left long ago, still not speaking their language.

"He didn't die here," Nin said.

"No, and neither did his spirit. Mother never knew he was still alive, and he never knew she died." A tear trickled down her cheek. In the darkness, no one could see it.

"We can tear it down," Myrya said. "If you think it's best."

"No," Rusty said. "Not today. We won't stay here. Let's go see the pits, dig a little, and try to find something."

Zella had said these pits might be dug out, with next to nothing left. They had been used for gens. The pits looked empty, picked over and dusty dry. Their tools wouldn't cut through to the ground beneath. The river was too far away, and their water gourds wouldn't carry enough to loosen the ground.

Rusty leaned against her horse and stared into the open pits.

Chimps chattered nearby.

"Come on, we are going to try another location. Maybe Corandra had a good idea after all. Wish she were here instead of with Ambrena."

She led them away from the Klapit the Webbels had known.

It wouldn't be far. Ancient lore said many of these mines were larger than all of their villas put together. If there were another part of the mine they could find, it would be the best thing for all of them.

## Chapter 10

Coughing children surrounded Ambrena in the Shells' treasury. They had all been brought in so Zella, Dover, Robin, and she could care for them, and their mothers. The villa had grown larger than the treasury could hold comfortably. A few adults were gone, those on the trips to Klapit and Westpit, as well as the hunters.

Stinky, runny fluids everywhere overwhelmed those who tried to keep clean cloths available for all the sick children. Warm water and tea for the sick did nothing to cover the odor of runny fluids. Coughs and sneezes played chase around the treasury. Their sufferers were laid waste. Dogs stayed away, and didn't come in to play. Even the mice didn't come in, as there was no food.

Something had to be done. Mothers and sponsors began to despair of their children being healthy again. The youngest ones were the sickest. Awake enough to cough and drink a little tea, then slip back into a restless, fevered doze. At least Corandra was safe with Rusty, and couldn't see what had happened.

Ambrena wiped Zande's fevered head.

Glenna cried and wrung her hands.

Rusty wasn't here to watch the boy suffer. There was no hope for him. While bringing them all together made care easier, sometimes, it made the sickest sicker. She walked over to Robin.

"Is anyone still in their own lodge?"

Robin helped another child drink warm tea. "I don't think so."

"We have to take the mothers outside. They are coughing too. Fresh air would do us all good," Ambrena said.

"And lodges need to be readied for winter." Robin looked up. "Do you think anyone would try?"

"It would keep people busy, and we could take the kids out in the sunshine. Sometimes, sunshine helps. Even if it is cold." Ambrena clung to the hope that Robin would agree with her.

"Tell Zella," he said. "Let her arrange it."

Someday it might be her arranging treatment of the sick. Tanna had been her age when Jorn handed her the leadership. Robin and Tanna were co-leaders. She didn't want full leadership. Some things she could be in charge of, like caring for the sick, and let Tanna pass the leadership to her own daughter, Pamma.

Zella sat in the sun and breathed the fresh air. Her hands were limp in her lap, and eyes stared far ahead.

Squatting beside her, Ambrena waited on her to acknowledge her. When no response came, she spoke. "We need to prepare the lodges for winter, and take the children out in the sunshine, away from the smoky fires." Ambrena wrung her hands, waiting on the imposing Zella.

The grandmother healer of Shells nodded. "I know. I'm worried about Tanna and Ola. She wants to send Pamma and Garn away before they become sick. If they aren't already sick, and good at hiding it."

Zella stood up. "If Corandra were here, I wouldn't be able to stop her from sending them with her to somewhere else."

Once inside, Zella's words brought a ray of sunshine into an otherwise dreary place. People were afraid to leave their children. Their hope lay in taking the children outside to recover, while they prepared for a cold and snowy winter.

Glenna's eyes did not look hopeful.

The night passed with children coughing all around.

Zande coughed and sneezed. After one particularly bad coughing spell, he screamed.

Robin ran over to him.

"Please, let me take him to my lodge to die," Glenna begged.

Dover held her close. "Shells has been through so much to reach where we are today. We will make it through this together, somehow."

Glenna held Zande close.

As morning dawned, adults carried their children out of the building and placed them where the sun would reach their weary, fevered faces. Several cried out as they were moved from the nest like places they had formed in the thick furs on the ground. At last, all the children were together outside.

"Ambrena, go and bring back water with the men. We are going to scrub the treasury down today while we can." Zella rushed about smoothing blankets and children.

Mothers reluctantly brushed their fevered brows and walked to the lake.

At least there was plenty of work to do while they waited to see what the Goddess Kafa decided. Ambrena grabbed a bucket.

The people walked to the main beach they used for swimming and washing clothes. It would be crowded with sad faces. As much as they needed a break, so did she. The turn off to Kafa Sighting wasn't far away. If she hurried, she could have some peace and

quiet without the wailing of mothers who feared for their children's lives.

The drenched bonfire circle glistened as the light filtered in among the branches. The lake appeared calm, with tiny surface ripples. Ambrena walked to the water's edge and filled her bucket. Standing tall, she held her hand over her eyes and glanced out over the water. Nothing in sight.

She turned and almost dropped the bucket. There in the sand were footprints. They weren't hers. Camel footprints ran alongside the human ones. They blended together, and disappeared in the leafy underbrush.

They could only belong to Corandra and Ellie. Where had she gone and why?

If she wasn't with Rusty, where was she?

Forgetting the bucket, she ran all the way back to the villa and skidded to a stop in front of Tanna and Robin.

As soon as her tale was out, Robin told her to lead the way.

He measured the footprints and followed them into the brush where they disappeared among the leaves.

"It's been several days. Where can she be?" Ambrena trembled. Her neglect of keeping track of Corandra would lead to more trouble.

"Alone and scared. We have no one to send looking for her. Where is Henry?" Robin moved a few leaves eyeing the prints on the beach.

"He left to go hunting the same day as Rusty, and the Westpit group left. I hope he finds her." Ambrena closed her eyes. Why did she do this to me, and all of us?

Robin glanced in the direction it appeared she had gone. "I hope so. Until then, there is nothing we can do. Our group is too fractured as it is."

He looked out over the lake. "Fill the bucket and wait. I'm going to follow her a little ways. Then we have to return to the villa."

Ambrena grabbed her full water bucket. Corandra was always in trouble. What would it take for her to learn to be part of the group, and not outside of it?

Robin returned. "I think she's going on around the lake. Maybe she met the Westpit group. All we can do is hope. Let's go. I'll carry the water."

Ambrena handed him the bucket and picked up a few sticks as they walked back. After cleaning the community lodge today, she'd have to gather firewood. Or send her not quite gen two friends to do

so.

The day went as smoothly as it could. Many lodges had a coat of mud and twigs added to protect against winter winds and snows. Three were given a new thatch roof, with many more to be completed. There'd be more work to do tomorrow, while waiting on the hunters and the search teams to return.

The hunters returned late that night, with a captive zebra for meat. It didn't take them long to butcher it, and cut the meat into strips to dry on the racks.

Ambrena worked on cutting up the meat Henry had brought her. "Henry did you see Corandra?" Ambrena asked.

His eyes clouded up. "I think so. I've followed her so often. She always comes safely back to the lodge, and I had to hurry. I never thought she wouldn't come back. I figured she needed to be alone."

Children coughed behind them.

Ambrena nodded. She helped cut the meat and hang it to dry around the sides of the treasury. What more could they do?

"I'll look for her tomorrow."

"You can't go alone. No one can be spared." Ambrena's knife sliced off more than she meant it to.

"I'll take two of Tanna's dogs and not go far. I promise. If they can track her, we'll find her." Henry's hand covered hers.

Morning dawned with the children coughing more and more. Many cried out now when they coughed.

Henry took the dogs to search for Corandra.

Ambrena sat in a corner and rocked. The treasury was full. Adults moved around trying to comfort crying children amid the smoky fires. No one wanted to work on their own lodges. Tanna and Ola were nowhere to be seen. It brought back memories of another treasury filled with smoke, and her mother. "Mother, I need you!"

Zella came to her side and held her.

Ambrena cried on her shoulder, sure every adult and child stared at her. The one telling them what to do, crying for a mother who had been dead so long, she couldn't remember what she looked like.

The entry panel opened. Henry walked in and shook his head. "Ellie's footprints went into the water on down a ways. I couldn't find where they came out again."

Ambrena felt as if a cloud had settled on her. She would heat water for tea, comfort a coughing child, or a crying mother. What she said, she didn't know. Stumbling along, she worked at what she had thought she was skilled to do, and now wondered if she could



continue. The memories of that fiery blaze and the screams echoed no matter which way she turned.

The entry opened again, and Rusty appeared, surrounded by sunshine. How dare the sun shine in on so much misery.

"Come on Ambrena, I have news." Rusty held something in her hands.

Ambrena ran to her. "Have you seen Corandra?"

Rusty's brow wrinkled. "No. She's with you."

Ambrena shook her head.

Henry and Zella hurried to the entry.

"Let's go outside," Zella said.

Rusty sat beside the building. "It was a tough journey. Dover was right. I had to do it. Anyway, we found things, not at the Klapit we knew, further on." She opened the cloth in her hand. Metal pieces, two good enough for digging, and plastic. Tiny pegs that could be used to help stretch furs, or in weaving looms.

"There's more. We don't really need a lot this season. Enough for tools to garden next spring. Maybe we can bring the sheet I found, and separate it out into tools," Rusty said.

"You did cover it back up, right?" Zella said.

"Of course. We even sat rocks on it, so the chimps won't dig it out again. I have to say; I really don't want them for neighbors."

A high-pitched laugh startled Ambrena. She realized it was her own, covered her mouth, and lowered her eyes.

Rusty shivered.

"I think you need some tea. Don't take it so hard on yourself Ambrena. You've done all you could." Zella held out her hand to Ambrena.

"She could be with the other group, right?"

Zella nodded. "She could be."

"Corandra's like me, not a gen two adult, and doesn't know what she's doing," Henry said. "I don't want her gone. Who will I fight with if she leaves?"

Several days dragged on. As the children became sicker, the treasury lodge reeked of vomit, urine, and bowels. No matter the weather, they all had to go outside every day to clean as best they could. It wasn't enough.

Zande coughed and screamed again.

Rusty ran to hold him. Beside her, Glenna rocked and cried.

It wasn't fair to her. Ambrena knew Rusty felt guilty for this whole illness. One of the reasons Dover had sent her away, was his hope

it would be over before her return.

Zande screamed again and again. Blood ran out of his nose, mouth, and eyes.

Rusty held him close while Glenna cried beside them. They rocked and crooned, patting his back, and trying to ease his suffering.

Ambrena put her hand against his forehead. It had been burning hot. Now it cooled. "Zella, Dover, come quick." It was too late, and she knew it.

The child had died in Rusty's arms.

Rusty's tears mingled with the blood from his eyes, nose, and mouth.

Dover left to make tea, while Zella tried to comfort them.

There was no comfort. Their lives had been shattered once again. Some would live. All would carry the hurt and fear within them. How many would die?

She ran out of the building and down to Kafa Sighting. At the edge of the lake, she fell to her knees and cried.

# Chapter 11

Henry's voice dissipated as Corandra rode Ellie along the lake's edge. Their footprints would be easily tracked if he followed them. At an open beach, she urged Ellie into the water.

Ellie snorted and side stepped. She had no problem stepping into the water to pull something out, or to drink. Going fully in, was another matter.

Corandra urged her on. If Ellie would walk in the water, a body's length out, her footprints would wash away. No one could follow, and the villa of Shells would survive without her there causing problems.

Weeds and underwater plants grabbed at Ellie's legs. Tiny fish swarmed as well, plucking bugs off her fur. Nearby, wild nutria played on the bank and the water's edge. They stopped and stared at her. One whisked under the water, and deep into a hollow tree.

Tame nutria lived on the other side of the washing and swimming area. These wild ones were rarely hunted, as their skins were less soft, and their meat far leaner than the ones the community fed regularly. Except this dry season. This season, there had barely been enough food for the people. None had been spared for the animals, who could gather their own.

Zella's nutria stew. The thought made her mouth water with anticipation. No matter how tough, dry, and thin the wild nutria, Zella could make it all taste delicious. Never again, would the tasty stew cross her lips.

Her stomach rumbled. Last night's meal seemed days in the past. When she reached somewhere far away, she would hang a snare to catch one, and try her luck cooking. She had the dried garden vines with her.

No point in dreaming. Corandra urged Ellie onward. Once she was far away from the villa she'd practice her meager hunting, foraging, and cooking skills. It couldn't be too hard. Her mother hadn't been much older than her when she had to rely on herself.

Ellie splashed around a bend in the lake. They could climb out soon, and would need to, if they didn't want to risk plunging into the deeper waters that crept closer. A walk through shallow water would keep Corandra dry. Deeper water would mean a cold swim.

Ellie scrambled up a bank and shook herself dry.

Corandra held her arm up to keep the dirty water from her eyes.

She had never been near this part of the lake. Roamers had not been known to come from this direction. No one ever came here, other than maybe hunters. There had to be people out west. First Shells had once been far to the south and west.

Trees and brush cleared as Ellie walked through. Dried berries clung to a few bushes. A good place to rest and eat.

Slinging her leg over, she slid off onto the ground. The berries were overripe, and fiery ants covered a smaller bush nearby. She grabbed what she could, and backed into the clearing while Ellie nibbled at the grass.

Once, long ago, Zella had mentioned a place she and Dover had explored with Calen long before. They had found paper with pictures and words. There might have been more. Corandra had seen the paper once, from where Zella kept her buried stash of artifacts. Colorful pages had crumbled when her hands touched them.

Perhaps if she found the place Zella had found, there might be more paper. Maybe even something to help the sick children. She had to try. Now which direction could it be?

Ellie shifted restlessly.

Corandra hurried back to Ellie. Patting her, she climbed on.

The camel trotted across the open plain.

A lion jogged in their direction.

Ellie wheeled about and ran northeast.

Corandra held on tight, barely breathing.

They passed the lion.

He slowed to a trot toward Lake Kafa.

She glanced back, and didn't see the lion at all.

The Grass Sea easily hid lions and tigers.

Once they reached more brush and tiny trees, Ellie slowed down.

Zella was nowhere near to guide her. All sense of direction was gone. Nearing midday, they reached dense undergrowth, with a small animal path leading deep inside. Shade would be refreshing from the midday sun. She took a deep breath and nudged Ellie toward the path.

Ellie trudged along the path. Branches whipped Corandra in the face. Before long, they reached another lake. Or was it a section of Lake Kafa she didn't know? Ellie gulped the water.

Corandra dropped down and drank a little. It tasted different from the water she knew. Not bad, or potentially dangerous. A good sign. Nearby, berry bushes held a few last berries, and roots undisturbed

by human hands would make a quick snack.

Soon, they left the lake, walking further northeast. The direction was clearer now. Something about it felt right. Birds flew overhead. Perhaps people lived in that direction.

There had been talk long ago of Mills, a place where people had retained some of the ancient's knowledge. They might take her in, and maybe even be able to help the sick children of Shells. If she could find it. No one had ever searched for it. Though Tanna and Robin had once said they would.

Ellie led the way through the thick brush and back into the open plains. Bits of broken rock littered the region, as if a giant had scattered large white and red stones among the arid ground.

Bison grazed in the distance, with one lone guard watching in her direction. Bison didn't see well from a distance. They'd see a camel and not be disturbed.

Corandra could bend low and hide.

Ellie led her through the tall grass.

By late afternoon, they had passed the bison, and reached another pile of white and red rock scattered among the brush. Corandra pushed her way through. This would be her first night spent outside. Though she knew that once, long ago, she had been alone on the trail. As an infant no less, in her mother's arms. If only her mother were here to hold her now.

And feed her. Her stomach growled from a lack of sustaining food. Berries and roots weren't enough for long marches. She'd have to try to snare a rabbit, or nutria, if one were around.

The clearing didn't have many vines, unlike at Shells where the hunters cultivated them for snares. The few she had would have to do. If she did catch an animal, there was no fire, or any fire making tools in her tunic. She sat down and stared at the ground. The one lodge she had ever known was a day or more travel away. No food, blanket, shelter, company, and no fire to protect herself from wild animals.

Food wouldn't appear in her hand. She picked up a rock and scraped at a boulder. Soon, the edge was sharp enough to dig out a few roots. After eating, she did her best to set a snare by the riverbank. If the animals here didn't know people, her smell wouldn't disturb them. A pile of leaves would make a temporary bed, until she decided if she was staying here, or leaving in the morning. With a bush on one side, and Ellie on the other, she should be safe.

The next morning, Corandra looked around. Hard to imagine it had been a full day since she had spoken to anyone.

"Ellie it's too quiet. Where shall we go today?"

Ellie snorted and walked out to the Grass Sea to graze. At least she was easily fed.

Moss covered many of the nearby tumbled rocks, causing her to slip and slide through the vegetation. Dandelions, a few cattails near the stream, and black walnuts. Not enough to provide energy to dig for long. Paper would be deep in the ground, and require lots of energy to dig out. Maybe she could bring Rusty here, if this was the right place. She gathered leaves and nuts, and checked her snare. Snapped in half, it dangled from the brush.

Corandra ate and wove another snare. Once it was set, she walked further into brush and searched for a suitable dig location. Rusty had tried to teach her what to look for. Somehow, nothing here looked at all like Shelpit. A flat rock would be a good spot for a fire later on, if she could make one.

She gathered sticks and moss, and left them on the flat stone to dry. Nearby, was a hollow big enough to dig without rocks scraping her knees. Nothing stuck out of the ground. Any paper near the top would have rotted away gens ago. With a sharp rock, she dug down as deep as she could into the soil.

Birds twittered and sang around her. One hopped down on the ground and dug out a worm. If she could dig as easily as the bird, she'd have found something by now. The rock could only dig so deep. Where the worm had dug its way out, she tried again.

Curious rabbits cheered her on, while the birds chattered overhead. Ellie returned to nap nearby. The deeper she dug, the more she felt she was doing something important. There had to be a solution somewhere. Zella always said the ancients left them information, hidden in the deep places that they would find when they needed it most.

She would find those things, whatever they were, that Zella had looked for all her life. Maybe the children could be saved. Perhaps, even her arguing with Henry, and the others, would be in the past. The adults might take her on a trading trip, and she could find a new lodge. With a resolve she had never known, she pushed the rock deeper into the ground.

Nothing found, she walked back to her snare. If this were the place Zella had found, maybe the paper she had brought back was all that had been left here. The ground near the stream wasn't dry,

like most of Shelpit, where they found the most useful objects. Further away from the stream, closer to the drier rocks, would be a better place to search. With no bucket or large gourds to transport water, digging in dry ground with a sharp rock would be far more difficult.

The snare had caught nothing. Still hungry, she walked to the flat stone and sat. Shells had always listened for the Kafa Goddess. Sometimes, though, Zella, Tanna, Robin, and Dover mentioned the Goddess Amber. Amber was the Goddess Ambrena had been named for, and the one all the other Pit Miners listened for. How had Zella said to try to speak to the Goddess Amber? It was different from Goddess Kafa. Sun and light, rather than water and stream.

Zella had said something once when Corandra had been so angry she could see her own red nose. Maybe she could remember it, if she tried. She glanced around.

Ellie dozed nearby.

Corandra closed her eyes, and tried to picture what Goddess Amber must have been like. An image of clouds and lines was all she saw. The lines made no sense, they wandered here and there, much like rivers and streams on the ground. Dark spots, like boulders clustered near several.

A cry startled her.

The swinging snare had caught a rabbit. Roasting it would take most of the day. The rabbit struggled as she tried to wring its neck. Henry always skinned the rabbits before he brought them to Zella. She missed teasing Henry that she was practicing. He always laughed and told her she wouldn't succeed at hunting.

No one to laugh with her today, or to help with the work. She skinned the rabbit with a sharp stone. Her cuts with the rock were poor, and damaged the skin. It had been a beautiful sandy color. Sweat rolled into her eyes.

After she prepared the rabbit to roast, she had to start a fire on her own. Dover made fire building look easy. She'd have to be careful, it was so dry here, a fire could burn easily once started, and she wouldn't be able to escape in the Grass Sea, even on Ellie.

While the rabbit roasted, she dug nearby. Halfhearted at best. Being alone didn't seem so fun anymore. Going off on her own everyday had always been her goal. Now, with only Ellie and wild animals for comfort, she missed those she knew most. There had to be answers from the ancients here. Maybe more paper or even the clay tablets Zella's mother had taken with her. Whatever it was,

she'd know when she found it.

Days passed. They all felt the same. Snare, dig, eat, and repeat. The rabbits that had come close before shied away. Except one who had become like a friend, snuggling up next to her at night. She must have been an outcast too.

Sunlight filtered through denser underbrush. Corandra had dug here the day before, and the ground felt different. Oddly familiar. She dug deeper, and her bladed rock finally struck something other than dirt, rock, or twig.

Her hands dug into the ground, and uncovered a red container. Corandra gasped. Not another one!

The top looked different though. It was smoother, and didn't have metal rods on it. She dug out around it, almost afraid to touch it. By midafternoon, she pulled it out of the ground.

Zella had said it wasn't the box, or even the contents, that made the sickness. It was what was inside the smaller bottles. She took a deep breath and tried to think what the Goddesses Amber and Kafa would want her to do. She had never cared before. Now, it mattered.

There seemed to be no answer.

One more deep breath; and she lifted the lid.

Inside were piles of paper.

Corandra squealed with delight. She turned to share the find, and realized even Ellie wasn't in sight. Her shoulders slumped, and shadows crossed the ground in front of her.

The lid dropped hollowly. Somehow, she had to carry this container to Zella. At least a day's walk back to Shells. It would have to wait until tomorrow. In the meantime, what could all those pages be? She had to save them, and not let them crumble to dust before they reached Zella.

Corandra carefully placed the lid on the container, and covered it with leaves. It would take the rest of the day to make a harness for Ellie to wear to carry the paper container back.

Two branches would make the rails. Several small trees looked like they would do the job, if her rock could manage to break them off. After chopping at one for a while, she turned to branches on the ground. Hopefully, two were strong enough.

The trail would lead over high rocks, and the container wasn't light. She gathered many more branches and wove a basket to dangle between them. More branches were woven into the two rails as high up as she dared.



Even so, Ellie might balk. She rarely pulled loads.

Corandra laughed. Ellie was about the same age as her, not a child anymore, and not really an adult, either. That strange in between place, that older adults said should be so freeing. For those living through it, it was a nightmare of trying to be responsible so adults would accept you, while missing the fun and games of previous seasons, and younger friends. Or friends like Rusty and Ambrena who had given up childish games for adulthood. Definitely not relaxing.

The last few twigs fell from her hands. This being alone with the animals for quiet, away from the gossiping villa relaxed her for a while. It wasn't the way she wanted to live. Returning tomorrow would be so nice. A few days to say goodbye, before she travelled to a new lodge. Maybe the Webbel villa would take her in. She was part of them, after all.

Or, her sponsor had been.

Children generally stayed with their mothers, whom they could be sure of. Every man accepted that he might have sponsored many children. They only cared that a child existed, not who might have helped it come into being. If she couldn't straighten her own life out, no man would be interested in sponsoring her child. She'd be ignored and have to resort to begging if she wanted a baby of her own. Beneath any woman's dignity.

Morning dawned, misty and chilled. Another reason to go back to the lodge. She had no winter clothes.

"Come on Ellie."

Ellie sniffed the harness and shook her head.

Corandra laced it up on Ellie as best she could. At last, she tugged and pulled the container full of paper over, and onto the basket. She lashed it down with braided cattails. Dampness and critters would destroy it quickly. If it stayed shut, the papers would last.

"We have to go to Shells. If they'll have us." Corandra grabbed a long stick to use to prod the basket out of holes, and followed Ellie into the Grass Sea. Ellie wasn't used to the weight of a basket, and couldn't drag it and carry Corandra too, not for the distance required.

The early morning sun streamed down on them. Small animals moved out of their way in the tall grass. No sign of lions, so far. Movement in the tall Grass Sea ahead was barely visible to Corandra. As they drew near, Ellie sped up.

Several wild grazing camels lifted their heads. One trotted toward

them and bellowed.

Ellie shook her harness and made a strange sound back at it.

"Come on Ellie, not now!" Corandra tried to direct Ellie away.

Today was not the day for Ellie to decide she was an adult camel.

The male camel kept coming toward them.

Corandra waved the stick at him.

He stopped at a distance and waited.

"Come on Ellie, let's find Shells," Corandra said.

Ellie stared at the male camel, and then turned away.

They had walked a good distance when the male thundered after them.

Ellie broke the harness and ran toward him.

The basket fell. At least her lashings had kept the lid on the container. She could weave a new rope with the tall grass. Rather than watch her friend, she pulled grass and wove a new harness.

Before long, Ellie came back. Dampness and a strange odor clung around her.

Corandra shook her head. "We have to find Shells. There are three male camels there."

Ellie shook her head as Corandra attached the new harness.

At least Ellie had come back. She didn't want to live with strangers any more than Corandra did. Maybe she could learn to live with the Shells community, if she could learn to control her fighting instinct.

It was almost dark when they reached the brushy line. They wouldn't make it to Shells tonight.

Morning broke in a new camp. Her stomach growled after an unsatisfying meal of water. Corandra hooked Ellie up again. They might make it to Shells for the midday meal, if they hurried.

It felt as if the journey would never end. The container bounced, as the basket branches wore out, and slowly unwove. If they didn't make it soon, she'd have to rebuild it with new ones. What if Ellie wasn't going in the right direction? They could be lost far from any villa.

Corandra gulped and tried to find something familiar. Everything felt familiar, while different. As if seeing it from a dream she had dreamed while awake.

Ellie snorted and ran to the camel and horse herd lodge. She had found Shells!

Corandra looked over the wall. All the animals were here waiting.

They looked hungry and raced in circles as if they hadn't been outside the herd lodge since she had left.

No. Two were missing. And only two.

Shelpit was silent. No singing or gossiping voices carried on the breeze.

Had she come back too late?

She pushed Ellie on to the villa.

The path was empty. A strange crooning sound overtook her. Someone, or everyone, mourned.

She stopped Ellie at Zella's lodge, and dragged the basket inside.

Back outside she followed the sound. At the treasury, she heard voices.

"Go, and be careful," Zella said. "Brael will have herbs to help Tanna. I am worried about her."

"I hope someone at Shims' villa knows the answer to this sickness," Dover said. "If they don't, you'll have to ask Brix to help you try to find Jorn, Uden, and Fendon."

"We'll try," Rusty said. "I won't let Ambrena go alone."

"Going now, we may find an answer. I hope Corandra returns soon," Ambrena said.

A horse snorted and pawed the ground.

"Henry, and some of the hunters, will look for her tomorrow, if she doesn't," Dover said. "Now go."

Horse hooves took off down the path.

They shouldn't go alone. She had learned that much.

Corandra jumped on Ellie's back, and steered her around the treasury. "Follow them the back way," she whispered.

Once the pair were far enough away, she'd let them know she had followed. Maybe, they would really want her with them. And if not, maybe they were going somewhere she could stay.

## Chapter 12

Rusty urged her horse through Shells.

Dogs and chickens slept against the lodges.

Glenna still crooned over the death of Zande.

Birds had left the villa for now. The mist of days before was gone. Dust billowed under the horse's feet.

Henry would be waiting at the herd lodge.

Rusty didn't dare tell even him she was glad to be leaving. She blamed herself for Zande's death, and Corandra's disappearance. Glenna would blame her too, before long, if she didn't already. Perhaps, if they had to find Jorn, Uden, and Fendon, it would be better to stay and not come back. An exchange of people. Villas did that occasionally.

Henry should come along. She had promised her mother to never leave him behind. He was almost an adult now, and didn't want to leave the only villa he could remember. Somehow, she thought that wasn't all. He worried about Corandra almost as much as Rusty worried about him. What a mixed up mess it was.

Horses neighed in greeting as she and Ambrena approached the herd lodge.

"Henry, ya here?" They often slipped into an unusual speech when alone together, which others looked askance at. Zella had smiled at them, much as she smiled at a pair of twins who also had private words.

"Ya, I'm here," Henry stepped out of the brush pile. "Wait. I've something to tell ya."

"Go on to the garden," Rusty said to Ambrena. "I'll be there soon."

Ambrena nodded and led her horse onward.

Henry's eyes lit up as soon as she was out of sight.

"I saw Corandra. She and Ellie came back dragging a container. I didn't dare follow her into the villa." Henry smiled. "It's good for her to be back. I wish you wouldn't go."

"You can come now if you want to. Let Zella know." Rusty really hoped he would. It would be good for him to be around other people, even if she feared and welcomed leaving.

"No. Have to make sure she is safe. And wonder what she found." Henry ran off down the path toward the villa. "Stay safe. Good luck, sis! Bring back hope and health."

Rusty smiled, and urged her horse on. Henry was so close to being an adult in many ways. So young in others.

The desolate garden looked far worse than any fall garden she could remember. Ambrena waited for her, near some brushy trees they had planted for shade long ago.

"What do you think we will find?" Rusty adjusted her gatherboard on the horse's back.

"Nothing, at first. Should we stay at Tuttle, or Shims, tonight?"

Either could help them. "We can make it to Tuttle by midday, and then to Shims by night. Quan may not know anything, though some of the hunters may have an idea which direction to go." Rusty led them down the track.

The brush-covered trail to Tuttle was overgrown without the trail caretakers cleaning it out. Animals had tracked more brush across the trail than growth, or wind, would do alone. A half-eaten squirrel lay at the bottom of the isolation marker.

No one had been through since the Klapit and Westpit searchers. Perhaps the illness hadn't come from the red container. Or, the other villas could be sick and staying close to their villas too. That was one reason they were going. The total silence. Normally, trade items would be left at the isolation stone after a few days.

The squirrel wouldn't have been left behind at the stone by another villa. Though, a larger animal may have stolen anything small someone left behind. Unless it was a warning of some other sort. They couldn't turn back and ask Dover now.

Rusty urged the horse on to a fast trot.

She slowed to glance down the trail to Almond. No sign of horses or people passing through in the last few days.

Ambrena trailed behind. While younger, she frequently visited the other villas with Tanna and Robin. Many ideas had been exchanged among them, and visits outside of Spring and Fall Trades had flourished.

Robin would take the items Rusty and Zella found in Shelpit to trade for Tuttle cloth, and Webbel tools. They arranged for the trades now held at Lake Kafa where Almond would share music, and Lava would recite the tales of old, all of which Zella and Tanna knew. Dover often went along to visit his sister Brael at Shims, to find if any newly discovered plants had healing powers.

Rusty preferred to stay with Tanna and Robin when Zella travelled. Even going to see her friends in Almond wasn't something she could face. At first, she claimed she had to stay with baby

Henry. As he grew, people gave up asking her to travel. She never made the effort. The thought of traveling, and stumbling upon the horrors of her childhood, made her heart hurt even now.

Glenna and Yananda had come to Shells to stay a few seasons before. They said the villa of Almond had too many bad memories. Now, would Glenna go back, or ask Rusty to leave? She would have nowhere to go that she had ever been.

One more reason to visit Tuttle. People there would know if anything was wrong in the other villas. They would return to Shells if Tuttle and Shims were sick as well.

Before long the cow lodge before Tuttle appeared. Cows mooded a welcome.

Rusty urged her horse on to the villa.

Smoke steamed from many of the small wooden lodges. No voices, and no one in sight. Nala, now the leader, would expect them to stop there first.

Outside of Nala's lodge, a dog yawned at Rusty. She slid off her horse and ran to knock beside the entry.

"Come in," Nala said.

Rusty pushed the entry aside and stepped into the dim interior.

Nala and Dan were eating, with three young children beside them.

Ambrena came in behind her.

Dan looked up and waved to an empty spot. "Join us? I can leave after I eat if you need to talk to Nala."

"Stay." Rusty drank tea and nibbled a piece of nutria jerky. Questions could wait until the children were finished.

The children chattered as they ate, and then went to their nap spots to rest.

Nala poked at the fire. "There is illness in Shells."

"We don't know what it is. At first, we hoped it was normal fall sickness. Now, Zande has died, and it's all my fault." Rusty covered her eyes.

Ambrena took her hand. "It's no more your fault than anyone else's. Is anyone here sick?"

"No. If Dover couldn't help, we don't know what to do. We are all staying close to Tuttle. Fall food and lodge repair gathering is about done anyway. Has Dover determined if the Fall Trade will occur soon?" Nala asked.

"We're not going back," Rusty said.

The youngest girl rolled closer to the fire.

Nala patted the girl's shoulder. "Why not?"

Rusty's hands squirmed so much she wanted to hide them. "Zande died a terrible death, like nothing Dover has ever seen. And others, mostly children, are extremely sick."

"Not the adults?" Nala gathered the dishes.

"That's part of the problem, we don't know. Some are coughing and sneezing. It may be from the smoke, and living together in the treasury." Ambrena said. "We are going to Shims as soon as we leave here. Any ideas of where we might go for help? There is hope Jorn, Uden, and Fendon may have answers, if anyone knows where they are. We have to save the children, or Shells will die."

Dan turned away. "And you come here. My past has brought this trouble."

"Hardly yours. Rusty blames herself. Corandra does too, and she ran away, and then returned. It's no one's fault. We have to work together to save the Pit Miners." Ambrena sat her cup down.

"Dan, you've known roamers. Please help us." Rusty said.

He hid his face in his hands. "I don't want to remember. Rusty, I still remember your mother, and your sponsor."

Rusty grabbed his hand away from his face. "Then you have to tell me. Help me, as you helped Nala back then."

She glanced at Nala and blushed. "Maybe not the same."

"I would if I could. Roamers mostly come from the north, or east. I never really talked to any to know them, or where they came from. I'm sorry. I was your age then, barely an adult."

Rusty closed her eyes. Opening them, she stared at Dan. "Where did my sponsor come from? Would Mills know anything?"

"I don't know. The silent friend he had with him left the spring after he recovered. He never spoke that I know of." Dan pulled himself up and walked to a box in a corner.

"You must know something."

Ambrena grabbed her arm. "Don't go after him. He may have forgotten anything, if he ever did know it."

"How could he forget?"

Ambrena pulled her arm closer. "Do you remember every detail of those days?"

"No. I was a child."

"And as much a leader as Robin and Tanna are today. I've studied the ways of the mind, and the tricks it can play. Don't force a memory that may not be fully true."

"It's my fault Zande went with Corandra when she found the red

box," Rusty tried to pull her arm away.

"And Corandra's fault she behaves the way she does. Everyone has tried to help her."

"And now they shun her," Rusty said. "I guess I did to."

Dan placed a fur wrapped item in Rusty's hand. "I think she always knew who she was. Abandoned by her mother, many unintentionally shunned her. Or were careful what they said, and how they acted, around her."

"I never!" Rusty said.

Dan shook his head. "Not intentionally. And maybe not even until her behavior became a problem. However, I've seen the looks. I know them well. I receive them regularly, even from those I have become close to."

Rusty couldn't believe it.

Ambrena nodded. "I've seen it too. I'm too young to know if those looks occurred before her bad behavior."

The young girl wiggled in her sleep again.

Nala comforted her. "I think they may have. It was never intentional. She was a burden, a nursing baby added to the few nursing mothers who survived the battle."

"Her mother nursed her and Henry." Rusty stared at the bundle.

"Uden felt sorry for Henry even then. She blamed herself for his troubles. She told me so once," Nala said.

Rusty opened the fur. Inside was a square wooden object, with four joined wings on one end. She held it close. Something was almost familiar about it. "What is it?"

"Something from Mills," Dan said. "I hid it safe for Henry someday. You may need it now."

"Thanks." Rusty stared at the piece of wood. Somehow, it held promise and hope for the future of Shells.

"We better be going if we are going to reach Shims before dark," Ambrena said.

"Thanks Dan," Rusty said. "Nala, I hope you aren't angry we brought up the past."

Nala laughed, not her usual silvery tinkle. "Sometimes we have to. I hope the past leads you to a brighter future."

Rusty followed Ambrena out the entry. If hope lay to the northeast, they might have a long trip.

People stirred outside, as naps finished, and the chilling sunshine begged them to come out before the cold of winter.

She followed behind Ambrena, not eager to speak to anyone.



Thoughts and memories swirled. Many she was sure were true. Others might only be only half-true, constructions of memory and suggestion as Ambrena had mentioned.

## Chapter 13

Ambrena steadied her horse and swung up carefully. It wouldn't do to be careless as they left. She checked to be sure Rusty followed, and turned towards Shims.

Dan wasn't hiding anything, other than pain. Of that, she was sure. His face had been clear while he spoke.

Perhaps they needed to visit the Webbel villa. Someone there might know something. The smallest villa of the six, most people avoided them, often even at trades.

Zella used to journey to visit Calen before her leg twisted a few seasons before. Webbel came to Spring and Fall Trades, and traded with the other villas who visited them. Otherwise, they rarely left their villa and surrounding hunting area.

Shims was closest to Webbel. Perhaps, Quan would know more. And, it would be a good opportunity to pick up a few more supplies for traversing the unknown lands in search of Jorn.

Ambrena urged her horse faster down the trail.

Birds fluttered away noisily.

The monkey troop howled nearby, and threw empty nutshells at them.

Her horse slowed as it approached the river. It neighed, reared, and turned to wheel away.

Ambrena brought her back around and scanned the riverbank.

Brix stepped out of the brush. "Sorry to startle you. How is Shells?"

Rusty pulled up beside her, flustered and out of breath.

"Not good. We need to see Brael. Is your sister in her lodge?"

Brix nodded. "Should be. If not, she may be visiting Quan. They were planning to send someone to Shells tomorrow if no news came."

"We need her help. Maybe more." Ambrena urged the horse across the river.

The lodges of Shims lifted up off the ground. The river nearby occasionally flooded, and would destroy the lodges if not grounded up high. Quan, of course, lived in a ground level lodge on a hill nearby. If it was washed away, much knowledge would be lost that could never be regained.

Children chattered and played on the ground as people strung their gatherings from racks under the lodges. Even though she

recognized most of the plants, there were a few that were less familiar. Perhaps Brael used some herbs Dover didn't know, or use often.

A few steps led up to Brael's lodge on a broken grey rock nearby.

Ambrena slid off the horse, and walked up the broken rock to Brael's entry. She knocked beside the entry. "Brael, are you there?"

No answer. She waited as long as she dared, and then scrambled back down the crumbling rock.

Rusty waited on her.

"I'll check Quan's. We need to talk to him anyway."

If Rusty had already checked Quan's they'd be that much closer to knowing what to do next. Normally, she would have taken the initiative to do so. She used to be so sure of herself. Corandra had led her to doubt herself, something Ambrena had hoped Tanna and Zella would see and talk to her about.

Quan's entry was partially open. She knocked. "Quan, it's Ambrena and Rusty. We need to see you and Brael."

"I'll be right out," Quan said. "Go on to the treasury. Brael went there with Calen's replacement."

That can't be good. Calen had led the Webbels since the uprising. She sighed and walked back to Rusty.

"Come on. Grab our gatherboards off the horses. I need some more medicines anyway. Calen has been replaced."

"Is he alive?"

"No idea. We'll find out soon." She grabbed her gatherboard and asked a boy nearby to take the horses to Shim's herd lodge. The boy looked like a son of Wenda, or Wale, two women hunters.

"Have you seen, or heard anything unusual lately," She asked as he turned to go.

He tilted his head, looked at her, and then shook his head. The horses followed his lead.

He must be Jasey, the child who couldn't speak. No one knew why. Dover had talked to him when no one in Shims could figure out why he didn't talk. Sometimes, he did make sounds. She wasn't sure if others would trust him as a healer, as he couldn't explain how to take a medicine, or verbally comfort anyone.

A silent life locked inside his body and mind. He was smart, and used signals to communicate with people and animals. People in Shims treated him as normal as anyone else. Animals followed him everywhere, even more than they followed other people. People

from the other villas avoided him, mostly because they felt the conversation was all on their part, with no reciprocation from Jasey. They didn't know the signals, and wouldn't use them often enough to remember them if they tried to learn them.

At the treasury building, the entries were wide open. Windsun covers were attached, though open. A few were tattered. Tuttle would be making new ones to keep out the winter wind.

"Hi Ambrena, come on in," Brael said. "We have to replace the covers soon, and make the winter entry replacements. It's going to be colder than usual." She sorted through the contents of a box at her side.

Ambrena sat her gatherboard down and reached in to grab a piece of material. It was red and black. She shivered as she dropped it back into the box. She had seen enough blood and muck that those two colors would never look good together again.

Lavina from Webbel came over to the box. "Not a good combination?"

"No," Ambrena said. "So many sick children in Shells. We watched Zande die."

Rusty sat beside her. "Wish I had done something different."

Brael reached out and took her hand. "Rusty, whatever you did, or didn't do, wasn't completely your fault. Perhaps there is a reason, deeper than we know. A hard winter is coming."

Rusty reached into the box. "Our villas aren't overflowing, and ages are pretty regular. Usually sickness takes the older people, not the toddlers. If Tanna's baby Ola dies, I'm not sure if she will go on living."

"There was a lot of blood loss afterwards. Tanna won't want to live if Ola dies like Zande did. She wanted her so much. For Shells, she will try to live, maybe," Ambrena said.

A shadow crossed the entry. Quan hobbled in and sat on a small rock. "Tell us what happened."

Ambrena and Rusty shared the story.

Quan nodded at points.

Brael and Lavina gave up sorting the rat gnawed entry and windsun covers.

"Beyond anything I know," Brael said.

"I saw you had plants I don't recognize. What are they?" Ambrena asked.

"A few of our hunters found some new plants to the south of us. We aren't sure what they are. After they dry, we will test them,"

Brael said.

The testing of new leaves could be dangerous, and even deadly. Or, what they could cure could remain unknown to the tester. Dover had told Ambrena she might have to do that someday. If it were something to make the endless coughing stop, she wouldn't know, as she wasn't coughing.

A breeze rustled leaves in a corner.

If Brael didn't know anything, they would have to go somewhere else. "Lavina, do you know if Calen, or anyone in Webbel, know the location of any other villas?"

Lavina shook her head. "Anyone who knew, either died, or left long ago. I wish we knew where Mills was. The object that Blake had planned to have built would have helped us stay warm in winter, though I don't know how."

"What was it?" Rusty asked.

Lavina frowned. "I have no idea. I overheard men talking about it once. I didn't hear much, and hid as soon as they opened the entry. They were dark days."

"We have to find someone," Ambrena said. "Dan suggested we look to the northeast, where Uden and Fendon go. Do you know more?"

"Brix thinks they sometimes come with a hunting group. Though the rest of the group never comes near the villas," Brael said. "I can't imagine traveling a long distance, just two people with lions and tigers all over the Grass Sea."

Quan stretched his legs and leaned forward. "Why do Dover and Zella think you need to search beyond the villas now?"

Rusty held out her hands. "Shelpit is mostly empty. I found a few things west of Klapit, not enough for two seasons. Westpit, well, our team decided it is still too dangerous, the tumbled teeth still cover the known search areas. They don't want to go back there, any more than I want to go back to Klapit."

Quan nodded. "I understand. I don't want to leave the one villa I've ever known any more than you do. So now, you search for a cure, and a new place for all the villas."

Rusty nodded. "Only our villa mines the pits. We need to bring Tanna's vision of togetherness to pass. To be one villa, instead of six. I don't know how."

A knock by the entry interrupted Brael.

Ambrena looked up to see Brix. She beckoned to him.

"I don't think you two need to travel alone either. You need a

hunter with you. I will go with you, if no one else will." Brix sat down beside Rusty.

Ambrena shook her head. "No one should go who doesn't want to. We can make it to somewhere."

Brix pointed a stick at her. "Before the cold winds blow? And be able to grab food from the back of a horse?"

He was right, and she knew it. They did need a hunter, for food, safety, and finding their way back. She had never trained for travel. Perhaps that was a weakness in their villas. They never travelled beyond their villa cluster. Even the monkeys had a larger travel range than they did.

"We will need you. If Brael can spare you." Ambrena closed her eyes and clutched her gatherboard.

Brael nodded. "Brix is our best hunter. He can help you most. What medicines do you think you need to round out your supply?"

"Let's see what you have. I don't want to take anything you don't have much of."

Brael laughed and led the way to the store of medicines. "We have plenty of all travel medicines."

## Chapter 14

Corandra raced back to Zella's and grabbed her gatherboard. She had to find food and keep up. Ambrena and Rusty would probably ride directly to Tuttle as they left the villa. She didn't want to be too far behind.

Her face stiffened as she ran back to Ellie. Zella would find the container, and know she had been here. If caught, they'd try to convince her to stay.

Rusty and Ambrena couldn't travel alone. She had to save Ola, and all the other toddlers, before it was too late, if it wasn't already.

Ellie raced the back way around the villa to catch up with Rusty and Ambrena. She stopped before the garden.

Rusty and Henry talked in the middle of the garden.

Ambrena waited further away.

A bush hid Corandra and Ellie from view. She urged Ellie through the underbrush along a little used trail, so she wouldn't be seen. Every twig snap made her jump.

Ahead, Rusty adjusted her gatherboard and urged her horse down the path. Ambrena rode alongside her.

Henry glanced back at Corandra's hiding place.

Corandra's heart beat loudly. She breathed deep.

Henry smiled and walked down the trail toward Shelpit.

Dust settled as Rusty and Ambrena rode down the trail.

Corandra urged Ellie to follow.

Ellie bounded along, and then skidded to a stop.

Henry stood in front of her with his arms crossed on a narrow stretch of trail. "Thought you'd follow them."

"I have to go. Let me by." Ellie sidestepped under her.

Henry stomped his foot. "Zella would say you've caused enough trouble already with all the worry you've given us while gone."

Corandra tried to urge Ellie around Henry.

Ellie raised her head and snorted.

"I don't want Zella to worry. I want to fix what I broke. Let me through."

Henry raised his arm and pointed back to the villa. "Go back Corandra. Go back to Zella's now."

Ellie sidestepped again, and stumbled.

"Don't hurt my camel. I'll follow if I have to walk."

"Not without Zella's permission you won't." Henry grabbed Ellie's

face, and pushed her back out of the narrow spot in the trail.

"Zella isn't leader. She can't make the decisions for me."

Henry held the fur on Ellie's face. "Zella can make the decisions for you. She hasn't declared you an adult. You are close. Showing some helpful responsibility might encourage her to announce you as an adult at the Spring Trade. Don't you want your own lodge to be away from me?"

Corandra tried to pull Ellie away. "Of course, silly. I am responsible. I have to find the cure."

Henry grabbed her foot. "If you are killed doing it, it won't help anyone. Stay and help us."

"Ambrena and Rusty can't go alone either."

Henry nodded. "They won't. Of that, I'm sure. They will stop in the other villas and someone will go with them."

Ellie snorted as Henry pushed her back gently.

"Okay. I'll meet with Zella. Bring her here though." Perhaps he was right. Better to make him happy.

Henry half stepped back. "Do I need to tie you to a tree so you won't run away again?"

"I didn't run away! I went for an answer." She couldn't believe he thought that.

"Everyone thinks you ran away from the mess, because you didn't want to stay and help clean up after sick children. That's why what you did wasn't responsible, regardless of your intentions." Henry stared up at her.

"Fine. I'll wait. That's not what I meant, and you know it." Corandra slid down off Ellie.

Henry laughed. "I know. I think Zella knows too. We need her opinion and consent."

"Be back quick." Corandra sighed. If the people of Shells really thought she abandoned them, she'd be in worse shape than ever. A new villa could be the answer. Who would have her?

Ellie nibbled on the dried grass nearby.

Zella arrived at the trail entrance.

Corandra couldn't read her expression. Zella was good at hiding her feelings, or showing alternate thoughts.

"So glad you returned. Henry said you brought something."

"I left it in your lodge. It might help. I need to go with Rusty and Ambrena." Corandra stood, unmoving.

"We need you here. Without them, we have no one to run Shelpit."



Corandra shook her head. "I don't like digging, or telling others what to do. And I can't tell two plants from each other."

"My daughter. I know I've been harsh with you occasionally. Please don't leave. Come back with me now. It's your lodge too." Zella took her hands.

She pulled away. "I'm an adult now. I did something bad, and have to fix it. Even if it means going away forever." She stared at Zella, willing an expression on her face. Anything. Her throat gulped.

Zella sat down on a tree stump. "Please don't go. Walking is too hard on me. We'll find something you are good at, if we keep trying."

Corandra patted Ellie. "All I'm good at is arguing. I need to go away."

Dover walked up and put his hands on Zella's shoulders. "Perhaps she is right. If she wants to go, let her."

This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. Dover never gave up. Her heart beat faster.

Zella looked up at him.

"However," he said. "We need Corandra to do one more thing before she leaves Shells for good."

He had said "for good." He didn't want her to come back. Her eyes stung, even though she knew it was how everyone felt. "What would that be? I'll try to do something." Dover had always tried to convince her to stay, and find something she was good at.

He nodded and helped Zella to her feet. "Stay with us tonight and show us what you found."

"I need to go. I'll lose them."

Dover took her arm. "No. They'll be at Shims tonight. We need you to go there tomorrow with Henry, if they don't come back soon after daylight. We need a message brought back here of where they intend to go."

"Can I follow them then?"

"I'd rather you didn't. You will have to make that decision then. I think perhaps, you need to stay at Webbel for the winter. It would be good for you, and them."

They still didn't trust her. "Come on Ellie."

Dover put one arm around her, and one arm around Zella, as they walked back to the villa. "Remember, Rusty and Ambrena are several seasons older than you. They attained gen two adult status this spring. Don't rush so. Enjoy the chance to explore skills."

Corandra refused to sniffle. She walked Ellie back to the herd lodge. With a goodbye pat to her best friend, she followed Zella to

their lodge. It wouldn't take long. Then, they wouldn't know where she was again. It might be for the best. After all, then they wouldn't worry.

She spent the evening with Zella sorting through the paper in the box she had brought back.

Zella's face was long as she listened to the story of Corandra's trip. She looked through the pages, and placed them back, without appearing to actually read them.

Corandra hadn't tried, as words and symbols were difficult for her. Everything looked blurry when she tried to learn to read the letters as Zella taught them. Somehow, they never made sense.

One bound pile was colorful. She picked it up and moved between the paper sheets as carefully as she could. Colorful pictures looked clearer from several body lengths away. Birds, animals, and even trees looked different from the ones she saw every day. The letters, even at a distance made little sense. They were tiny and ran together.

"Zella, what do they say to you?"

She took the pages and checked several. "Reminds me of one I found long ago. It shows places and animals far away, and gives their names. Whether they are real, or tales, we will never know."

"Like my drawings?"

The paper in her hand fluttered to her lap. "Much like them. We know the ancestor's artwork was complicated. I don't know how to reproduce it. Your skill with that might rival theirs, with the right tools." Zella said.

"Wouldn't serve much purpose? Art without meaning. No one needs that! Everyone says so." Corandra shuffled her feet on the sandy floor.

The fire crackled and lit the lodge as well as possible.

"Perhaps. We only have so much space for art. You okay?"

Zella's crooked smile winked in the firelight.

Corandra rolled over, away from the fire. "My eyes always hurt when I try to look at paper. Outside, I can see anything in the distance well."

"I wish there were something I could do to help you."

"So do I. I'll go to sleep now, if you don't mind."

"Sleep Corandra. May you feel better in the morning." Zella picked up the pages again. She put them aside and took the group Corandra had been looking at. Holding them close, she wrinkled her brow and concentrated so hard she didn't hear the log snap in half.

Corandra woke often during the night.

Zella sat by the fire reading and watching. Perhaps the pages were more exciting than Corandra knew. Or, perhaps she was waiting to see if Corandra would keep her promise.

# Chapter 15

Shims' treasury bustled as people gathered. One woman handed Rusty a Tuttle blanket to add to her gatherboard. Children ran in out of the dimness, to embrace the awakening dawn.

Rusty breathed deeply. People she knew, and a few she barely knew, buzzed around her. Dust floated in the open entryway. Life had been so simple. Her plans for the future as the dig leader had become a reality. Now, her return to Shells, and the future she had dreamed of, seemed doubtful. They wouldn't want her to lead the pit mining anymore after what happened. Sending her on this trip had to be Zella's way of finding someone new to take her place while she was gone. No one in the villa had as much interest in mining as she had. Even if there were any of the ancestor's tools left to mine.

Ambrena touched her shoulder. "We'll be okay. Uden can't be that far away. Maybe she knows where Zella's mother went. I think that's half the reason Dover and Zella want us to go."

"To find where she went?" Rusty pulled out of her thoughts. She looked around dazed and confused, unsure of where she was.

Ambrena slung her gatherboard on her back, and pulled the pocket to the front. "She took a lot of forgotten knowledge with her. Dover knows of one or two of the Shims' group who may have gone to the same place a generation or two before. Maybe they came and asked Zella's mother to join them."

"And then Jorn joined them too," Rusty said. Would the Shells adults become sick, as the children grew better? It had happened before. When the adults couldn't take care of themselves, and the kids couldn't either. Many, or even most of Shells, might starve during the winter. Maybe the unknown village could all help, or at least replace the dead.

Jasey waited beside their horses. He grinned up at them.

Brix rode up on a horse leading a heavily loaded camel. "Jasey and I are going with you."

Rusty patted her horse and turned to Brix. "No, this is my job. I made the decision that killed Zande."

Ambrena shook her head.

Jasey climbed in between the huntboards loaded on the camel.

"Quan's decision. Wanna argue with him?" Brix raised his eyebrow and stared at her.

Rusty closed her eyes. Zella didn't trust her to be dig leader now.

She didn't even trust her to find her way to a villa she had never been to. No surprise.

"You'll need me to find trails, and to protect you," Brix said.

Ambrena laughed. "I hope we can protect ourselves. We will need your help finding food though. Thanks for offering. Rusty and I will ride alone from Shims to the hunter's separation point, if you don't mind."

Brix nodded once, and waved them on.

The clear sky and rising sun didn't lighten Rusty's heart. Brix and Jasey joining them weighed her down, as more responsibility she didn't want. Telling Corandra to be responsible was easy. Taking responsibility for others while fixing the mistake she had made with Corandra, was another matter entirely.

Ambrena stopped at the edge of Shims and spoke to the crowd who had followed them. "We don't know where we are going, or when we will be back. Thank you all for gathering supplies, as well as sending Brix and Jasey. I've no idea if anyone can help Ola, or the others. It might be better to stay away from Shells."

The group waved to them as they walked the horses off toward the separation stone. Brix and Jasey lagged behind waving goodbye.

"Rusty, quit worrying. We shouldn't travel alone. No one knows where we are going. We may need help bringing Jorn and Uden back, and a cure."

"Aren't you scared?" The Grass Sea hid lions, tigers, and so many other hunting animals.

"Of course," Ambrena said. "I feel like I am giving up everything, and everyone I know, for the unknown. Zella, Dover, Tanna, and Robin are depending on us. Far more than anyone else can imagine."

The separation stone loomed ahead, a place where hunters and gatherers stopped and rested together. Brix and Jasey would expect Rusty and Ambrena to wait for them there.

"I don't know what I want. It should have been so simple to be dig leader."

"And for me to help others. Goddess Kafa and Amber have some reason for this. We have to find the reason, and do our best. You've always been the strong one. We depend on you."

Rusty stopped beside the stone. "My heart is broken. Zande isn't my child. He was as much my child as you and I belong to Tanna and Zella. Glenna and I shared teaching him his toddler skills."

"I know you did," Ambrena smiled. "If you two stayed together right now, you'd be fighting like Corandra and Henry do. A few days apart will bring everyone back to a new normal."

Rusty fought to hold back the tears. Brix and Jasey must not see her cry, or they would send her back to Shims, or to Shells, in disgrace.

Horses snorted, on the other side of the stone.

"Let Brix lead us for a little while. You will know when you are ready to lead again," Ambrena said.

She nodded. It had to hurt Ambrena too, who had always looked up to Rusty, as a little older, and somehow, more a part of the villa life flow. No idea why, or how, that happened. It did. Rusty preferred being in the background, quiet and unseen.

Ambrena led them out into the Grass Sea, and called for Brix and Jasey.

The men waited for them beyond the stone, on a little used pathway.

Rusty stayed at the rear of the line. Walls of grass, even and tall waved beside her. Finding her way through would be as tough now, as long ago when she walked and carried her infant brother from secret Webbel to find Zella. Then though, there had been trails at least, and small animals to follow. And hope for the future.

She let the horse follow her friends. This mare was a granddaughter of the grandmother's Sandy look-a-like. It had amazed Zella how fast they had become used to people. Of course, other villas they didn't know may have lost their horses, and these may have been recent descendants of them.

Lost in thought she didn't recognize the deep rumble in the distance. It sent shivers up her spine. Perhaps the ground had shaken. Goddess Amber could be warning them to turn back. Or, elephants walked nearby. A few were known to journey through the region in the fall.

Brix stopped near a group of trees, a little larger than a lodge. The group bunched up close together.

Low rumbling intensified.

Rusty's heart beat fast.

Even though few elephants came through between the villas, many visited Lake Kafa to the west. That bellowing didn't sound like an elephant looking for food or water.

Brix maneuvered the horse's back ends together, with Rusty between Jasey and Ambrena.

A dig stick should be enough to ward off stray foraging elephants. There was plenty of food for them, and little competition. She wanted to run for the trees so they wouldn't be seen. Brix however waited, and motioned for silence.

Three great grey beasts came around the right side, and four around the left side of the small patch of trees. The elephants were not alone. Four people rode on the backs of the lead elephants. Their clothes were grey and closely fitting, almost like an animal's natural skin.

Who were these people on elephants? Rusty drew in a deep breath. Her horse shifted and tried to pull away.

Jasey grabbed the horse's mane and held her still.

The elephants surrounded Rusty's group of horses.

One man sneered at them and grunted to the man beside them. "One man out alone with two girls, and a child. That's unusual, even for your strange groups." His voice had a strange melodic difference that distracted from the words spoken.

"Where are you from?" Rusty asked.

He laughed, and so did his companion. "Doesn't matter. We have been watching your group. We need that one to help us." He pointed a spear right at Rusty.

Brix glanced back at her with one eye.

"What do you think you need me for?" Rusty tried to not look, or act, surprised.

The man nodded toward his elephants. "Our animals do the hard work. We need a dig leader to do the delicate digging. Our diggers are repairing our boats now. We know you lead your group in the dig, where only men should lead." He laughed long and loud.

It sent shivers up Rusty's spine. Brix had his hunting spear, though it'd be no use against four people with spears, and seven elephants. And boats, there had been something about them in the lore Zella shared at gatherings. She'd figure it out later.

Three elephants moved back to create an opening to the east. The elephant rode by the woman took the lead.

"Don't worry, we won't keep you long. Not after the snow flies. Now move!" The man shook his spear at the horses.

The horses jumped, and skittered through, following the woman.

Rusty held on, unsure what, if anything, she could do.

The crude man rode in the back, with the other elephants surrounding them.

Rusty had been jostled to the front of the horses, and was

closest to the woman.

Occasionally, the woman looked back at Rusty with an unreadable expression on her face.

What could they be taking them for? How long had they been watching the villas? And where were they from?

She glanced to silent Jasey who rode up beside her.

He held his hands out, palms up.

From anyone in Shells, the motion would have no meaning. For him, it meant to wait. He might have a plan.

Rusty motioned a slight hand nod in understanding. Ambrena, and maybe Brix would notice the communication. Hopefully, the roamers wouldn't.

Jasey slipped back behind her.

It always amazed Rusty how well Jasey could communicate without words. Animals understood him almost as well as his family and friends. Though a few people shied away from his quiet ways, most had no problem with his lack of speech.

A few Webbels, including Calen turned red, and moved away, at the sight of Jasey. Others held their heads high, and tried not to speak, for fear their voices would crack around him. Though, it couldn't really be their fault he couldn't talk. He was born over four seasons after Blake and Orid died. However, the Webbel villa saw Corandra, and Jasey, as a reminder of those evil days.

Traveling had quickly become a nightmare. Already well beyond any place Rusty had been, she almost wished she had stayed at Shims. Of course, the plan had been to find hope, help, and others. They had found other people, though not anyone they were looking for.

Snakes darted across the path, upsetting the lead elephant. It trumpeted and danced in the tall grass. The unknown woman struggled to hold on.

Rusty's horse stepped out of the way. If she were alone, she'd escape then. With Jasey, Brix, and Ambrena behind her, there was no way they could all escape. Jasey might not be able to escape, with a fully loaded camel. The horses, she was less sure of, particularly, in a region they didn't know. It would be too easy to become lost out here in the Grass Sea.

The woman fell off the elephant, and it careened out of control. The elephant the woman had led, raced right toward her body on the ground.

Rusty covered her eyes. She couldn't escape now.



Ambrena wouldn't leave a woman to die.  
So, she had to stay, for her.

## Chapter 16

Ambrena followed behind Jasey. Her mind raced, asking the questions she knew were on everyone's mind. When Jasey rode up beside Rusty, she struggled not to smile. She mustn't let the roamers know she recognized the sign he gave her.

If it gave her hope; that was what mattered. Rusty had been too hard on herself lately, and that was unusual enough. This becoming an adult was much tougher than either expected, or dreamed of, as they made their plans for the future the last several seasons.

Three male roamers watched ahead, and not toward her. She glanced back at Brix and repeated Jasey's sign.

The lead elephant trumpeted.

Her horse bounced under her, skittering to the side. Ambrena struggled to turn back to the front, and regain her balance.

In front, the elephant the woman rode held its trunk high in the air. She slipped off behind it. Directly into the path of the elephant she had been leading. Her elephant sidestepped out of the way of the oncoming one, and trotted east across the Grass Sea.

Ambrena gasped and urged her horse forward, hoping to scare the stampeding elephant. She raced past Jasey and Rusty in a flash.

The second elephant careened to the side. It kicked the woman hard as it changed direction, and raced off across the Grass Sea. In the distance, the two elephants met and slowed together.

The male roamers screamed and yelled at her.

One quick glance, to be sure it was safe, and Ambrena leaped to the ground, pulling her medical gatherboard with her. Her horse stood still beside her, blocking anyone from coming up behind her.

The woman groaned. Blood trickled from her lip.

"Stupid, stupid little sister. Do you want to die too?" The roamer leader screamed as he stomped up to her.

"Vendon, no." The woman clasped her stomach and tried to roll over. A scream rent the air.

The roamer stood over her, as the other two walked up.

Ambrena reached to feel the woman's forehead.

Vendon smacked at her. "Don't touch her. She will die."

Ambrena gasped at being struck. No one had ever struck her. Not since the evil days. "I can help her. I have my medical gatherboard."

The man shifted on his feet. "You are a child, and a girl at that." Those words could have come from Blake, or Orid. She shivered.

"Let her try." One roamer male sat down beside the woman. "The girl might can help Yall."

Vendon sneered at the man. "Marken, I don't want her to help if it will leave my little sister unable to work for the community. We will have to leave her here to die. That wound is not survivable." He hefted his spear and aimed it at the young woman's head.

"Let her try, please. At least allow the young woman to check her." Marken pleaded with Vendon. He touched Yall's hand, and then turned to Ambrena.

Ambrena glanced between the three. The unnamed man stayed out of the conversation and watched Rusty, Jasey, and Brix closely to be sure they didn't escape.

Yall groaned, and tried to roll over again.

"Don't move. Vendon, I have to help her. I won't give her any medicine if you don't want me to. I won't kill her." Even if you did steal us. The others could escape while she helped Yall, and come back for her with help. She gulped. With Yall injured, they could be dangerous, if they treated women as some of the ancestral stories said had been common once. Vendon sounded like one of those ancestors. The ancestors Goddess Amber railed against.

Vendon stepped back and almost nodded.

She pulled out a piece of fur to wipe Yall's face.

Almost out of side vision, Rusty, Brix, and Jasey sat watching her. Their horses grazed nearby. Brix and Jasey held their hands flat above the ground in a stay sign. They could communicate while she checked on the young woman, who may, or may not, survive. Her own breath slowed; glad they wouldn't leave her behind.

First thing was to check if the mouth bled. Ambrena touched the woman's cheek. She turned her head partially toward Ambrena, and groaned. Good. The blood was from a cut, and not from deep inside.

"Can you speak? What is your name?" Ambrena leaned close to listen.

"Yall. Scared."

Ambrena pulled back. "That was quite a kick you took from the following elephant. Will they come back?"

"Or go back to Kees." Marken kneeled beside them.

"What a waste. I gave her the gentlest to ride, and she lost control of her. We need all their strength for mining." Vendon shook

his spear at the young woman.

Ambrena wanted to close her eyes and shake her head. "Yall, lift your fingers."

She lifted her right hand and wiggled those fingers. Her left hand lifted barely a hand's width, and the finger movements were slow, and unsteady.

Arms and legs were lifted slowly next. She could lift them a palm's width. Not enough muscle control to walk or ride. No problems Ambrena could see, or fix, though she was bruised and bloody.

"I hope you took the brunt on your legs. I need to see your chest, and be sure it is okay. I don't want to open any wounds as they start to close."

"I'll help her sit up," Marken said.

Yall's eyes brightened as he touched her.

All hope wasn't lost, if some in the roamers could care for each other. Healing the mental wounds would be even more difficult than the physical, for this young woman.

Vendon growled at the two.

Yall gasped for breath as she sat up, with Marken assisting her.

Ambrena checked Yall's back. There were angry red welts. No sign of leaking blood. However, deep inside could be damage in the bones, or other organs, and there was no way to know.

Once their ancestors would have been able to know if Yall were hurt inside, though even Dover couldn't guess how. He knew it had been possible, if it wasn't a dream tale that never really happened.

Ambrena sat back and glanced quickly at Rusty. She wanted to wait longer, to allow Yall to begin to heal. "I see little I can offer her besides tea. Yall will be in much pain, and we need to let her rest until the bleeding stops."

Vendon grunted. "Xile, gather the elephants. We'll wait here. Take one of the horses, and try to round up the two elephants that ran off."

Xile glared at Vendon, then at Rusty, Jasey, and Brix before taking Brix's horse and racing away.

"We will not start a fire and make tea. Cold water will be good enough for a foolish sister." Vendon stomped to his elephant.

Brix leaned his huntboard forward.

Last night, Brael had asked Jasey to show them many of his typical daily signals. Of course, she didn't know his hunting signs, and that looked like one, though she couldn't decipher it.

"What startled the elephant?" Marken pulled a water skin from inside his shirt.

"Two snakes raced." Yall took a deep breath. "Across the path." She clutched her side. Blood trickled from her mouth.

Marken glanced at Ambrena.

She touched the water skin, different than the gourds they used. Warm with body heat. It would have to do. Ambrena closed one eye and peered at Yall. Blood from the mouth was not a good sign. Internal bleeding could kill her. Water might help, or it might not. "A little. We need the blood to clot."

Marken moistened her lips with the warm water.

Yall smiled at his touch. She gasped as a spasm of pain jerked her body.

Rusty crawled up beside her. "She has no necklace. Did she lose it?"

"We don't wear necklaces. They tangle in everything. Especially on the boats." Marken caressed Yall's cheek.

Ambrena touched Yall's forehead. It was warm, though not unusually so. "Yall, how do you feel?"

"Not good." She tried to roll over and gasped in pain.

They waited in the sunshine. No one spoke or moved.

Yall breathed slowly, as if every breath hurt.

Ambrena wanted to help her, and make it all okay. Her own breathing quickened. A pat on the shoulder, or a hug wouldn't fix her. Touch would hurt her more.

Xile returned with the two elephants in tow.

Marken caressed Yall's cheek. "I'll put her on my pack. Can you help me?" He looked right at Ambrena.

Something about his eyes were hauntingly familiar. She nodded.

They strapped Yall to a huntboard big enough to hold her whole body easily. He packed his belongings around her to hold her steady. Together they tied it on the elephant he had ridden.

Ambrena stepped back beside Brix, Jasey, and Rusty, and picked up her gatherboard. It was barely large enough to cover her back as she walked.

"Climb on your horses! You aren't escaping now. We need more hands than ever." Vendon waited until they were in the center of the small elephant herd before following them.

Ambrena rode beside Marken.

Yall didn't struggle or cry from the bumpy ride.

"Why do you need us?"

Marken glanced back at Vendon. He steadied the huntboard Yall rode on carefully balanced in front of him. "We took our boats down to the giant lake, and a bad storm destroyed them. The drought here, isn't there."

Ambrena didn't know of any giant lakes. "Where is the giant lake?"

"Far south of here. We have tools to make our boats go faster. One capsized, and three boats full of our people disappeared in the storm. We don't know if they survived."

Storms would have been nice; they had been dry so long. Although, any storm that destroyed boats would be too strong for their gardens, and might have killed them as well. "Wish it had rained here, like it usually does."

"We need your dig leader to help us dig. Our leader is missing. We have to find the pieces we need to make our boats go, and search for them this winter, away from our gardens at Kees."

"Are some of your group there now?"

"Yes. Only our boat could make the trip back. Two boats, and all the people on them, disappeared completely. A third broke, and made it to shore. They are still there, searching, and trying to find supplies to repair their boats."

Vendon didn't stop when they reached a river. His grey clothes blended in with the elephant, and the water as it swam across. The horses swam across, eyes blazing at the strangeness of being fully immersed in water. Even with three roamers riding the elephants, there was no hole large enough for all four to escape to safety.

Yall whimpered as the water lapped at the huntboard.

Ambrena couldn't reach to feel her forehead. Internal injuries could mean all kinds of things were wrong. For some, warm tea would help. For others, it would make them worse. Sometimes something warm on the location of the injury would help. For others, it would kill. Dover might know what to do if he were here.

Of course, if he were here, he'd fight his way out. They had to escape at some point. Brix would have to help them return safely, and warn the others.

They reached the other shore and scrambled back up onto dry land. Vendon didn't even glance back. The horses struggled up the bank. Xile prodded them on.

"What about your gardens?" Ambrena asked.

The Grass Sea opened back out around them. It all looked the same, never ending.

"They grow in winter. We are short on food right now, and many of our gardeners are among the missing."

"Please don't hurt our villas. We have a sickness killing small children."

Marken steadied Yall on the huntboard. "I know. We have watched you. We are late to find our supplies for growing vegetables. There were too many extra days spent trying to rescue and find the rest of our burb. If the rest of our group had returned, we wouldn't need you four." He looked down at Yall's face.

She was pale, and in obvious pain. Lines formed on her face as she grimaced from each bounce.

Ambrena moved back in the group beside Jasey. She would try to privately share the signs she felt she needed to. If she could remember them. Being able to "talk" without Vendon and Xile knowing helped.

The terrain grew rockier.

Vendon switched places with Xile.

Jasey glanced her way.

Ambrena made three quick signs. Wait, she knew that one. She was less sure how to convey they won't hurt us while they need us. If we escape, they will steal others, and maybe hurt them more.

Jasey lifted his head.

Did she lift her hand correctly and say "wait," or did she tilt it the opposite way, and say "scream?" Before, when reading his signs, she had always been able to ask questions to clarify. Now, she was trying to figure them out correctly. She had never needed to silently communicate. Now, her life, and the lives of Rusty, Brix, and Jasey depended on her remembering the correct signs.

Rusty wasn't doing well either. Her face was pale. She clutched her horse's mane tightly. What memories haunted her on this ride? Her usual chatter was absent. A solemn silence ensued, broken only by the patter of hooves, and the plop of elephant's feet.

# Chapter 17

Corandra woke.

Zella and Dover sorted through the papers.

The fire fascinated her. Something about the flames leaping toward the roof without reaching it struck her as special. This almost tamed wild thing was more like her than most people realized. The circle of stones held the fire captive, while it danced high to give them light, warmth, and cook their food.

If she had something of value to share, maybe Shells would accept her, and her outbursts would become more tame, much as the fire beside her. It crackled and cackled at her, laughing at her fears, and feeding her hunger to leave. She tossed a handful of sand at it, to hear the hiss, and watch the flames dance merrily, always out of reach.

"Morning Corandra," Zella said. "Guess you want to leave now?"

She nodded, still too asleep to speak.

"You are welcome to come back with Henry." Dover placed one pile of paper at his feet. "There is something for you to do. We will find a place for you in the community."

Corandra sat up. "My place is to be disagreeable it seems."

She pushed the hair out of her eyes. "Where is Henry anyway?"

Zella laughed. "Since you dislike him so. I'm surprised you asked."

She pulled her blanket close and faced the fire. "Well, he is supposed to travel with me, much as I don't want him to."

The pages in Zella's hand fluttered. "Henry will be back."

She reached out her hand and touched Corandra's shoulder.

"Since you dislike him so much, you won't have to travel alone with him, at least part way. Glenna is going with you both back to her lodge at Almond."

Fear and rage boiled up inside Corandra. To be saddled with Henry was bad enough. Glenna too! Glenna would despise her for killing her child. In fact, she hadn't seen her, or anyone from the villa since she returned. The thought blinded her. She clenched her fists and pulled them close to her body.

"Glenna will kill me."

Dover handed her a cup of hot tea. "Glenna won't hurt you. Drink some tea. You need some strength. She wants to go to Almond to grieve among family, and needs an escort."



Corandra jumped back, nearly knocking the teacup out of Dover's hand. "I'm no escort! I killed her son." She rubbed her eyes, and tried to keep from crying. She would not show emotion. Too much had already leaked out. No wonder no one liked her, or wanted her around. The hard wall of the lodge prevented her from moving any further away from Zella and Dover. She couldn't leap over the fire. It would burn her, much as her own temper did.

Zella moved over and put her arm around her shoulder. "I'll help you pack if you want."

Corandra nodded. Her fist was in her mouth. She couldn't speak if she wanted to.

Containers lined the wall by the entry. Corandra knew what should be stored in each. She crawled over to the first and looked in. Dried nutria. Zella's favorite for snacking, or stews. There were plenty more at the breeding grounds, so she could take a few pieces. Two strips as long as her palm should be enough for today. She wrapped them and placed them in her gatherboard.

"Take at least three handfuls," Zella said.

"I don't want you to do without. You won't be able to dry more until the children are well."

"There is plenty. And what else have we had to do besides mind the meat dryers while the children are sick? In fact, several drying racks are ready to be emptied today. I need more storage space for the fresh dried nutria. We have dried zebra too. It has given several of us something to do while staying close to the villa." Zella reached her hand into the container and pulled out more. "I'll pick up more later today."

It didn't take long to fill her gatherboard. Dover handed her one last fur wrapped package to place on top. What it was, he didn't say.

Henry knocked beside the entry. "We're ready. I brought Ellie for you."

Corandra picked up her gatherboard, and walked to the entry.

Henry's face showed no emotion, or thought.

She might never see Zella or Dover again. Somehow, goodbye didn't seem like enough. She struggled to open her mouth. Not daring to look back, she said, "I'll miss you both. Thank you for taking care of me; and trying to help me be who you wanted me to be. I wish I could've."

She hurried to Ellie, and settled herself and her gatherboard.

Henry shook his head as he led the three down the pathway. "She's crying you know. You don't have to leave her."

"I do have to leave. She won't miss me long. I was too much trouble."

Henry stopped at the entry to the horse pen. "Of the four daughters and one son she raised, she only has one daughter left at Shells. Her oldest."

"You could all have stayed," Corandra shifted the gatherboard. It wasn't her choice for Henry, Rusty, or Ambrena to leave. Now she had to watch Henry, and find Rusty and Ambrena, as well as solve the problem of the illness.

"Someone has to go with you. No one should travel alone."

He mustn't know she knew he was right.

"Glenna, I'm sorry. Nothing I can say will bring Zande back." Corandra said.

Glenna's hair covered part of her face, and she brushed it out of her eyes. "I know. I'm going to see Yananda. I'll come back soon. Tell Rusty I miss her when you see her."

"We have to find them. Let's go." Corandra urged Ellie back onto the path.

Glenna followed next, with Henry behind them.

Corandra kept her eyes forward, and wouldn't look back. It wouldn't do any good anyway. What she didn't already know by heart couldn't be important in the new life she hoped to find. Maybe the shattered bits of her soul would come together in another villa, far away.

Without stopping, she pushed on to Almond. If Glenna or Henry had shouted, she might not even have heard them. Her focus was inside, planning, preparing herself, and being sure she knew where all the supplies were she needed for a trip alone. Regardless of what Henry said, she would make the trip alone. She could leave him behind at Shims to return to Zella and Dover. Or, if he followed her to Webbel, she'd sneak away in the night.

At Almond, all the people crowded around Glenna, and helped her off her horse. Tears sparkled on everyone's cheeks, and in their eyes. People were so happy to see Glenna there, in her birth villa.

Corandra gritted her teeth. No one had come to see her last night when she returned to Shells. She sniffled, not about to let a tear join the crowd on the ground. Ellie turned and started for Shims.

"Don't rush off," Henry said.

"We have to reach Shims before dark."

Henry's eyes closed as he clutched his horse's mane. "We will. Wait until Sharel comes back."

Yananda took Glenna's hand and walked down the path.

"Be careful, both of you," Glenna hollered back. "Particularly Corandra. Don't rush off on your own again."

Sharel ran up to Henry with a pile of colorful Tuttle woven cloth. The reds and yellows glittered in the sunshine. "Share with Corandra when you reach Shims. I know she is in a hurry to leave."

Something about the look Sharel gave Henry bothered her. What did that look mean? Would Henry come back and stay with Sharel sometimes, as many couples visit. Or would they stay together, much as Dover and Zella often did? It was an interesting thought. She tried not to laugh as she turned Ellie toward the road to Shims.

Henry caught up and rode beside her. "We can talk more now."

"I've nothing to say." She pulled her camel away from him and raced down the path. A stupid thing to do. Limbs reached out and grabbed at her hair. She slowed down. Maybe he would stay behind her.

Ellie jerked to the right as something small skittered across the path.

"Calm down. What was it?" She couldn't see anything other than a few leaves moving along the trail.

"I think it was a cat." Henry rode up beside her. "I hope it was chasing something, and not being chased."

"The Kafa Goddess isn't happy with me, or she'd quit sending problems across my path." Corandra urged Ellie forward.

"Or, she wants you to stay, like everyone else."

She turned to face Henry. "Who other than you, Zella, and Dover has ever asked me to stay?" No one had, that she knew of.

"Rusty and Ambrena."

"They say that because they helped raise me. And it makes you happy, for some reason."

He didn't answer, and stayed close behind her.

As the shadows stretched across the path, they reached the horse herd lodge for Shims. Henry's horse nickered to friends who lived here.

Corandra slipped off Ellie, took her gatherboard, and let her join the others. A night in Shims, and then on to Webbel, or on her own.

Henry handed her some of the blankets Sharel had given him.

She barely nodded and walked along the trail to the villa of Shims.

The moon slipped into visibility as they stepped into the group of stilted lodges. People were around the outside treasury fire pit.

Children and dogs ran and played.

They had missed the evening meal. Perhaps, Rusty and Ambrena were still here.

Brael and Quan would know; if she recognized them.

## Chapter 18

Rusty rode behind Ambrena and listened to her talk to Marken. It wasn't much hope. Maybe, if they could make friends with him, they would have a chance to escape. Or, Ambrena would know something to drop in the tea of Vendon and Xile, so they would sleep soundly, and escape. They might even take Marken and Yall with them, to learn about this strange group of people. Zella would like new stories.

Morning seemed long ago, as the sun crept across the sky. She drowsed and nodded, even though the sun wasn't as warm. Napping while riding would give her the strength to escape in the night.

Vendon and Xile rode behind them, watching silently as they crept across the plain.

As shadows lengthened, Vendon called a halt near a pond, like many they had passed. "We won't make it by night. We'll go on in the morning."

The elephants trumpeted at the sight of water, and pulled Xile along. He stayed with them as they tramped down the right side, toward wherever they were going.

Rusty slid off her horse, and waddled to Ambrena, Jasey, and Brix. Riding some each day was normal. All day, was more than she had ever done. Her legs and arms ached.

They helped pull Yall down off of Marken's elephant.

Yall groaned as the huntboard landed on the ground.

"Can you speak?" Ambrena hovered over her face.

The young woman mumbled.

Ambrena would care for her.

Rusty stepped back to sit beside Jasey and Brix. What would these roamers do with them tonight? Would they be safe? Shadowy memories of an Almond villa night long ago haunted her.

Brix opened his pack and pulled out some dried meat. He handed some to both Jasey and Rusty without speaking.

Vendon glared at Ambrena. "When you are done checking on Yall, take your friends and horses to the watering hole. Don't try to escape. Xile knows how to use a spear. And those elephants will catch you."

Ambrena's gatherboard was by her side. She had pulled out a few herbs to supplement their meal. "Will we have a fire? Yall really

needs hot tea."

Vendon growled. "When you come back. Marken will gather firewood. Now go."

Jasey scurried off ahead of them with the horses.

Rusty reached for Ambrena's hand as they walked to the left side of the pond.

At the pond, Jasey stepped into the water with the horses. He checked around him, to be sure Vendon, Xile, and Marken were not nearby. With his wet toe, he drew a sign on the edge of the bank.

Rusty glanced at it as she dipped her hands in to drink. He had drawn an "I" beside a spear tip. Did Jasey mean he would go to the villas for help, or that he would sacrifice himself for them to escape? She glanced up at him.

He tapped his chest once and reached for a horse's mane.

She smiled at him.

Brix made a motion with his hand. No words spoken. He then wiped the signs away with his hand.

Of course, Vendon would think neither could speak, and wouldn't recognize Brix's voice when he led the hunters that Jasey would bring back. There was no way to know where these people were taking them. If she had misunderstood Jasey, there would be no way to know, until Brix felt safe speaking again.

They walked back to the camp spot.

Marken left Yall's side to gather wood.

Vendon growled at him, and tapped the ground.

"How is Yall?" Rusty sat beside Ambrena.

Ambrena rubbed the woman's head with cool water.

"She is somewhat warm, though it may be the traveling."

Ambrena's eyes widened.

Rusty nodded and twiddled a piece of grass between her fingers. Ambrena wouldn't leave the woman to die. If there were somewhere to dig here, she'd have something to do. Of course, that was why Vendon said they took them. There'd be plenty to dig the next day, wherever they were going.

Marken built the fire in a small circle of stones left by some previous traveler, and set the water to heat. Then, he moved over to sit beside Yall, still on the huntboard.

"What exactly are you looking for?" Rusty asked.

Marken looked up at her. "You know what things are that come out of the ground. You call objects different than we do, some anyway. We need glass, metal, and pre-tools."

"Pre-tools?"

"Items we use to make tools from. Hard to describe. We'll show you when we get there."

Rusty patted Yall's hand. "Z." No, don't say her name.

"I've heard of glass. I've seen tiny scraps. What do you do with it?"

Marken lifted his arms to point the way. "Over there is a place with green glass in the ground. It has other parts, metal, and objects in it. We melt the glass, and separate the pieces. Darker glass we use to let light in our lodges. We also make clearer glass for our gardens. We also need metal, so we can fix and build our boats."

"Green glass? Lots of it? I'd like to see that!"

Yall squeezed Rusty's hand.

"There isn't much anymore. We think it is running out. The elephants have done as much digging as they can. If they go in the pits now, they can't climb out by themselves."

Ambrena brought a cup of heated water to her, and one for Marken and Yall as well.

"So you need us for?"

Marken closed his eyes. "To dig down low in the ground. The elephants will pull vines that drag the buckets out of the pits. We need a lot of glass, in a hurry."

"Their villa is mostly missing," Ambrena said.

Vendon stalked off to join Xile in settling the elephants nearby.

Marken sipped his tea. "Vendon's mother is among the missing. So many are. We have to find them."

Yall's fingers reached for him. "We will."

"Why didn't you ask, rather than steal us?" Rusty said.

Marken shook his head. "I wanted to. Vendon said you wouldn't come on your own. He watched, and saw the girl who left alone. He doesn't understand people who allow girls any opportunity."

Jasey brought fresh hot food from the fire.

"Kees never needed help before, so we never let you know we travel through."

"That explains the elephant herds hunters sometimes see in the fall."

Marken grinned. "That's us. Or, them. Grey clothes to hide on the elephant's backs."

Rusty rested her hand on his. She glanced at Ambrena and Jasey. "Do you know Uden, Fendon, or Jorn?"

He turned his head to look at her. "Not sure the names are

familiar. Sometimes people change their names if they travel."

Yall touched her hand. "Undle?"

Rusty shook her head.

"Hey, you are whispering too much!" Vendon shouted. "Come over here so Xile and I can hear you."

Brix walked over to help Marken lift Yall and bring her to the fire. The elephants had gathered around them, and were hobbled together. No escape without being trampled under their feet.

Brix and Jasey wouldn't leave without Rusty and Ambrena.

Ambrena wouldn't leave Yall on the verge of death.

Rusty wouldn't leave until Marken had shown her the green glass and other tools he had mentioned.



# Chapter 19

Ambrena rubbed cool water on Yall's forehead. The young woman was close to her own age. Too young to ask a man to sponsor a child. Old enough to plan and prepare for that day. For a woman at this stage in her life to die would be devastating for any villa. She would fight to save her, if it was possible.

The fire flickered on silent faces. Wolves howled in the distance. A lion roared between them and Shims. Stars peeked into sight along the moonlight's path. On such a night, a few seasons ago, some of those lights had blinked closer than she imagined possible for the stars, which were out reach of any human.

Perhaps Goddess Amber flew among the stars overhead, watching over them. If she saw the Pit Miners at night instead of during the day, she would never know they were in trouble. She might not even recognize Ambrena and Rusty so far from Shells.

Yall made a sound, too weak to speak.

Marken leaned over to her. "You can do it, somehow." He picked up a stiff blade of dried grass and handed it to her.

Yall drew something in the dirt and fell back, unable to exert herself anymore.

"What?" Ambrena asked.

Marken smiled. "In Kees, to please our God, we must draw a picture every night before we sleep. Different ages draw different pictures. Yall is supposed to draw two, as she is between ages."

He took the piece of grass and drew a picture Ambrena couldn't see this far from the flames. "We always do it, so we live to see the morning."

Vendon grunted. "Their ways are different. They wouldn't understand."

Ambrena turned to him. "We have group ceremonies. I may be the only person who has individual ceremonies. If others do, they keep it private."

The fire cackled.

"Sleep," Vendon said. "Xile will guard until my turn."

Ambrena shivered and pulled Rusty and Jasey close. Brix stretched his huntboard between them and the fire. Marken and Yall were side by side at their heads.

Vendon stayed on the other side of the fire with Xile.

Ambrena didn't intend to sleep. She feared Xile more than

Vendon, and with three young adult women, it simply wasn't safe to sleep. The hazy, smoky memory of her early childhood, mixed with Vendon's attitude toward the young women, and his own sister, sent shivers down her spine even more frightening than any of the ancestor's warning tales Zella had ever repeated.

Sunlight snuck over the horizon as the moon dimmed.

Ambrena stirred, unsure where she was.

Rusty and Jasey slept beside her.

Brix sat beside the fire, stirring the embers. He lifted his finger to his lips.

No elephants in sight.

Marken sat behind her, alone with Yall. "They will be back with the elephants soon. Better wake up Rusty and the boy. Does he talk?"

Ambrena shook her head. She patted Rusty and Jasey awake. "How is Yall?"

Rusty and Jasey scrambled to their feet and rolled their blankets into their gatherboards.

Marken patted Yall's hand. "She woke up earlier."

"Wanna go back to Kees." Yall's eyes opened.

"Soon." Marken looked up at Ambrena with hope and fear in his eyes.

Ambrena quickly checked her. No visible changes since last night. Yall's head was warm. Beads of sweat glistened on her brow. She lightly touched the young woman's stomach.

Yall moaned.

There was no more chance of saving her than there had been to save Zande. Ambrena's eyes closed.

A shadow crossed Marken's face as he bent over Yall.

The elephants returned, followed by Vendon and Xile. "Hurry if you want water. Take your horses. We have to start the dig today."

Marken walked with them and the horses. At the water's edge, he said, "I'll do what I can. Thanks for trying to help Yall."

Brix placed his hand on Marken's shoulder. "Give us a chance. Brael can help."

"Would she, or is that a he?"

Brix laughed quietly. "She is my sister."

Marken's face turned red.

"Travelers don't know our names. Are there many people where we are going?" Brix leaned down to fill his gourd with water.

"All we have are at Kees." Marken shook his head.

Brix nodded. "Jasey?"

Jasey helped his camel out of the water.

"Wait." Brix stepped back above the water line.

They hurried back and started on the journey.

Ambrena rode near Marken and Yall. By midmorning, they had passed many small ponds, and reached an area filled with grey rocks. The elephants trumpeted and raced to a grey rock wall beyond a large central fire pit.

Vendon sneered and pointed at Brix. "You go put your horses and camel in with the elephants. I will show the girls around."

He led them through the rock covered dig area, far larger than Shelpit.

"We usually have many people here. Where you will be digging is that pit over there. No running for the trees. If you find plenty of artifacts, you may be able to leave soon."

After they had some food and water, he handed them buckets and called for two elephants to join them.

"I need to check on Yall, and be sure she is settled. Marken, come with me," Ambrena said.

"Be there before the elephants return!" Vendon shouted. He prodded Jasey with a stick.

Ambrena and Marken settled Yall under the brush in the shade. "May I speak to her?"

He nodded and stepped back, far enough that he couldn't clearly hear what she said.

"Are we safe?"

"Angry, not bad." Yall breathed slowly, her chest barely rising.

"Will you be okay here alone?"

"Make noise if needed." She showed Ambrena two pieces of attached metal that could be shaken together.

There was no sign of anthills or deadly bugs. Without cut grass, Yall didn't have an adjustable sleeping mat. Or, a cover to protect her from the sun. Ambrena helped Yall to shift as comfortable as she could be out in the open.

Xile passed by the fire pit with the elephants and shouted. "Leave her now."

Ambrena glanced at Marken and hurried to join the others in the pit.

Digging through the rubble was exhausting. In fact, Ambrena had rarely dug. She had helped Rusty sort when Zella and Tanna could

spare her from herb collection.

"We'll need water to loosen the soil," Rusty said.

"There aren't enough people." Vendon gripped his spear and pointed it at her.

"My blade is breaking. We can't dig ground this dry."

Vendon sighed. "Okay. Xile, take two of the elephants for water. I'll be watching you four."

Rusty's blade barely scratched the surface. Even below the surface, where it should be damp, the ground was as hard as the rocks surrounding the elephants.

Ambrena glanced up at the cloudless sky. Would Goddess Amber be watching? Lore said there had once been a way to break the hard ground. It hadn't been easily controlled, and the people lost it. If it were found again, could they control it?

## Chapter 20

Corandra and Henry strode through the crowd milling around the fire pit at Shims.

Brael and Quan sat near the fire talking to someone she didn't recognize.

Henry sat beside them and waited patiently.

Corandra closed her eyes and joined him. Waiting wasn't her strong skill. Patience was too close to procrastination.

"Are you sure Lavina?" Quan leaned closer to the unknown woman.

"Calen didn't want to worry everyone. He sent my son this morning as soon as the scouts were back." Lavina braided dried grass stems without glancing at them.

Brael leaned back. "Brix said he thought he saw, or heard something, a few days ago. That's why I insisted he and Jasey go with Ambrena and Rusty."

"They could be in danger," Lavina said.

Quan nodded. "As our ancestors said, trouble comes every generation. I hoped to not live to see another one. Rusty and Ambrena shouldn't have to see another difficult time so soon."

"Please, we have to find them," Corandra said.

Quan touched her hand. "Ah yes, the one whose skill remains unspoken. You will find them, though not alone, I fear."

"Zella and Dover want her to stay in Webbel for the winter," Henry said.

"To Webbel you will go, though not for long. You have had no luck finding your place among the villa of Shells?" Quan's straight back showed no sign of emotion as he spoke.

Corandra shook her head and looked at her lap. "I've a difficult personality. And now, I know why."

He laughed. "That may help us. You will go with Lavina in the morning. Calen will have to bring the entire Webbel villa here. Those we can spare and train quickly will go on to search for Rusty, Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey."

"Everyone is coming here?" Lavina asked.

"Do you have a better solution? We will send runners to Tuttle. Every blanket they have will be needed. Almond's musicians will do their best to keep our plight out of mind, when it is out sight. Lava will arrive so they can to add new knowledge to our community

treasure trove."

"And Shells? There is the nasty sickness." Corandra leaned forward, almost touching Quan's knee.

Quan stirred the embers near him. "Yes, somehow, we must guard them from here, where our medical knowledge and tools are stored."

"The problem is dangerous?" Corandra asked.

"A dream last night, before Rusty and Ambrena left almost made me want to make them stay. Goddess Amber said they must go. Now, it is up to you. If Jasey does not return by morning light, we know something went wrong."

"Come with me," Brael said. "You will sleep in my lodge tonight."

Morning dawned with no sign of Jasey. Corandra rolled over and stared at the fire.

Ida, the hunter, knocked beside Brael's entry.

"Come in." Brael stirred the fire to heat water.

She hurried in and sat beside the fire. "Quan said to come straight to you."

Brael dropped the bowl of water. "Is Jasey hurt?"

"Someone is. Wenda and I followed their tracks. Elephants and footwear we don't recognize. Not sure how many. And blood. Someone was hurt. We found a wrapping, so we know Ambrena helped whoever was hurt."

It was all her fault! Now they would send her away for sure, once the trouble was past. Corandra groaned.

"Corandra, Henry, wake up. Bring your horse and camel. You must go with Lavina immediately. Return before sundown." Brael gathered supplies to add to their huntboards, and prepare for tracking down the missing group.

Corandra grabbed a piece of dried meat. Not much of a meal to run on. She had never been to Webbel. A new trail through land she had never seen should have been fun and relaxing, pointing out features and animals. Instead, it was hurried. The trail looked like every other trail she had been on, with no distinguishing markers.

They reached Webbel closer to midday than midmorning. The villa was in an uproar. Dogs barked. Chickens cackled and flew out of the way of running children. People ran from lodge to lodge, as they carried piles that hid their faces, and dropped furs and other belongings on the ground near the villa treasury.

Calen was the lone steady and quiet person, standing tall among the sea of running people, barking dogs, and flapping chickens.

"Hurry. We must leave soon."

Lavina added more items to her gatherboard from her own lodge. She packed it so full Corandra wasn't sure how she would be able to carry all the weight.

The three sat with Calen outside the treasury to eat a quick meal of dried meat while the people loaded the few horses they had with everything they couldn't carry themselves.

"Two of our hunters found trouble this morning. Snares broken. Elephant tracks. Horses in the herd lodge neighed and reared in fright waking us all before morning's light."

"Anything else?" Lavina asked.

Calen shook his head. "We have no camels. Every person will carry as much as they can. I am afraid we may not be able to return. It seems we ever suffer from the fault of those dark days."

"It's my fault," Corandra said. "The Goddesses are angry with me because of who I am. I should never have been allowed to live."

Calen stared at her.

She blushed and ran to Ellie.

A barking dog startled the camel.

Henry joined her and helped the people of Webbel load even more onto the horses.

Calen tied handles for tools onto Ellie's back.

Corandra would ride and watch after the small children. Or, at least Calen had asked her to. It was the least she could do after all the problems she had caused.

At last, Calen led the group toward Shims.

Abandoned chickens cackled and roosted in open lodges.

Dogs loped along behind the people, pushing the children as close to the horses as was safe.

Corandra could run far faster on Ellie than the horses around her. Ellie could skim through the trails, or off to the side to watch for danger. Turning the camel around, she raced back to the villa, and through it, to the horse lodges.

Beyond, were the trampled spaces the elephants had made nearby. Some prints were large, and far apart. Others were deeper, as if the animals had stood still for a long while. Something glistened in one of the footprints.

Corandra picked it up. It was different, not something she recognized. Rusty would know what the shiny object was. It vaguely resembled some objects in the sort baskets.

A lion roared in the distance.

Ellie raced back to catch up with the people of Webbel. No children struggled with the walk at the back of the line. Families usually walked to the trades meetings, though they were never this bowed down with weight and belongings. It wouldn't be long before there would be stragglers.

Henry waved to her to wait.

She hurried on ahead to look for more evidence of the elephants along the path's edge.

At one clearing, she pushed Ellie out to the east. Hunter's horse trails would circle back to Shims. Those trails would be a good place to search for the elephants. If the elephants were a loose herd, they'd be long gone. If people were with them, they might have left more artifacts that Zella, or Dover, could identify.

Pushing on, she reached a small clump of bushes. Elephant tracks and the tracks of people mingled here. She wasn't as good a tracker as Henry, so reading them took a while. Even after looking closely, she couldn't tell how many people or elephants had stayed here, or exactly when.

A rabbit startled Ellie, and they hurried back to catch up with the group of people walking to Shims.

By nightfall, the subdued group trudged to the Shims' fire pit. Many children stumbled along, and adults had to grab them, to keep them from falling into the fire.

Quan and Brael waited for the group to eat.

"You ran off on your own, didn't you?" Quan said.

Corandra nodded. "I had to know."

"What did you find?"

She held out the shiny object, now dull in the darkness.

Quan took it, looked at it, and handed it back. "How many do you think there are?"

"I don't think there are too many. However, there may be more than one group. I saw two places where they had stayed." Corandra put the object back in her gatherboard.

Quan waited. "Are you going after Rusty and Ambrena?"

"Of course. I will leave in the morning. You can't stop me."

A dog sniffed and settled at his feet.

"No, I suppose not. However, Jasey has not returned. You could be hurt, killed, or worse. Are you sure you want to go alone?"

Corandra gulped. What he left unsaid was frightening. What had been done to her mother, could be done to her. And, may have already been done to those she must find. "I don't want to go alone."



I have to save Rusty and Ambrena from becoming like Uden."

The fire spread a warmth through her she didn't recognize.

Quan held out his hand. "Would you humor an old man?"

She stared at him. What did he mean?

"Wait until we have enough people to go safely with you. We can send part of Shims, and most of Webbel, day after tomorrow.

Almond, Tuttle, and Lava will be here as well, and can send help.

Every hunter, and most who can hold a spear, or throw a stone."

The fire crackled and a child called out for his mother nearby.

"I don't want to wait. It may be too late."

Quan closed his eyes. "Young woman, we need you to lead the people who go."

"No one would follow me." Corandra laughed.

Henry sat beside her, and handed her some water. "You'd be surprised."

Lavina held out her hand. "We need you Corandra. The rest of us." She shook her head and sighed. "We're too nice sometimes. You tell it like it is, a breath of fresh air. May be what we need to save us all."

"I argue with everyone."

"And we may need that," Lavina said.

"They'll run from me." Corandra pulled away.

"Hopefully, you can make the people on the elephants run from Rusty, Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey," Henry said. "You can track almost as well as I can."

"If I could keep my mouth shut, right?"

He groaned.

Lavina laughed.

"Some will stay here to protect Shims, though?" She didn't want to stay behind to protect the villa of old and young.

Quan nodded. "Most your age will. Now rest. You'll need your strength tomorrow."

## Chapter 21

The pit mine had steep sloping sides. It was at least two people deep. Shelpit had been dug at, or near ground level, with dirt refilling the holes. It reminded Rusty of the tales of Westpit. Not a place with good memories, though the memories were not hers.

Tanna had once told her of how they had dug there. Their style had been different, though the miners who survived had never questioned Zella or Rusty about the difference of techniques. If she had asked, she might have learned something useful. Perhaps much of the ancient's knowledge was lost that way, simply from not passing something on to the next person. As the lead pit miner, she should have asked, especially as the concern grew that Shelpit was nearly empty. Perhaps, even now, Zella would think to ask a few of the survivors. Even if it did stir up painful memories.

"What you staring at?" Vendon asked.

Rusty jumped. "Trying to remember another way to dig in dry ground."

"Xile is back with the water. If you think of something, let me know."

Xile walked the elephants up to the edge of the pit. Another elephant came behind, and tipped the bucket over. Water sloshed down the sides, and covered part of the bottom.

"I can't send the bucket down, it's too heavy." Xile laughed as the water splashed Rusty in her face.

She wiped her forehead and walked over to the edge of the wet area. "Show me how you did that again, using the empty bucket."

Xile grinned. "Sure."

The elephant pushed on the now empty bucket, and it thumped on its side, releasing a trickle of water.

Rusty wet her digging tool, and stuck it in the now damp dirt. Something about the bucket tip was familiar. A memory so old, she couldn't name it, nagged at her. Trying to latch on to it wouldn't help.

"Here." Ambrena slid down the slope followed by Marken.

"How is Yall?"

"She's as okay as she can be, I guess. Any idea where to start?" Ambrena sat her gatherboard against one wall of the pit.

"I wish we knew what we are looking for. If we did, it would make it easier." Rusty scraped the ground.

Brix and Jasey worked nearby. Setting snares, pit traps, and

even baking pits had required them to scratch the surface of digging. Searching for objects had never been something they had concerned themselves with. Though, of course, like everyone else, they knew how to recognize something that may hold potential for a miner to verify what it was.

A butterfly laugh tickled her throat at their attempts to delicately dig and watch for something unique. The ground loosened and she focused on her digging, trying to find something worthwhile.

Vendon, Marken, and Xile joined them, digging nearby.

The ground turned up little in the way of useful objects. Pebbles and tiny bits of broken green glass-like substances were plentiful. Nothing solid or whole to be found. While working and filling her basket in silence, she tried to determine what about the way Xile watered the ground evoked a memory. It wasn't one of fear, so much as one before fear.

Vendon and Xile joked and laughed as they dug in the ground.

Their sideways glances at Ambrena made Rusty shiver.

She had to ask what artifacts they were digging for. "What have you found here in the past?"

Vendon grunted. "Our ancestors found green glass and metal. We need a lot of metal for our boats."

Rusty crawled to one of the pit walls. It was deeper than any of them were tall. The sides of the wall reminded her of a woven blanket from Tuttle. Shaded lines consistently level, except in one place. There the layers seemed to rise. One layer was a hand's width above its matching color. Orangey shades leaked from the top of the mine, toward the bottom. As if rain had washed a turned over blanket dye bucket down the sides.

The search for glass and metal would be different from the search for paper. Shelpit had been known for paper, plastic, and metal. Paper had disappeared long ago. Scraps of metal and plastic were left. No pieces big enough to make anything they needed.

It could be the same here. Wherever here was. The metal scoop she had loaned Corandra that day was already turning the same orange color as parts of the wall. Before long, it would melt into nothingness. Secrets of how the ancients kept metal useable above the surface of the ground had long vanished. They would have to learn how to make metal on their own, and how to save it, or soon have to learn new ways to make tools.

She sat back on her feet. If all the mines were empty, she'd lose her place in Shells. Even Zella and Tanna would no longer have a

valued skill, other than healing. Though no one would make Zella leave. And Tanna could do so much more than lead the mine.

"Why aren't you digging?" Vendon scowled at her.

Rusty jumped. "Trying to find a spot that is certain to contain artifacts. I don't see any."

Vendon's face turned red. "You'll find one, if I have to stand over you and make you!"

The elephants above the pit trumpeted and squirted water on the group at the bottom. They turned and sprinted off.

Xile raced up the incline after them.

Vendon glared at her. "Girl, find the artifacts now!"

Rusty bent toward the ground. Her eyes stung with tears. If he knew there were things in the ground, he should be able to find them. How did he expect her to do what he couldn't?

Xile returned, red in the face. "I put them back in the herd lodge."

Vendon grunted and glared at Rusty.

Her metal piece bent under the strain of the dry ground. A piece of green glass embedded in the dirt gave some promise of hope. She worked on releasing it until sweat poured down her forehead. At last, it popped out of the ground, a round piece, a little bigger than a pea.

Brix smiled and handed her another piece, almost identical, to add to the bucket of found items. Inside the bucket were several pea-sized pieces of glass. No metal at all. Jasey dropped in a dark brown piece questioningly. She'd look at it closer later. Probably an old piece of wood. Perhaps it would have some kind of writing on it.

She passed the bucket back to Vendon.

There was nothing he could say. They were digging where he had said to dig. He sat it down and glared at the wall.

"I need to check on Yall," Ambrena said. "May Rusty come with me?"

Rusty looked up at Vendon.

He scowled. "Go ahead. We'll all take a break. Marken can prepare the fire for a meal. I had hoped for more today."

"Don't go far!" Xile said.

"They can't go without their horses." Marken lifted the almost empty gathering bucket.

"We don't even need the elephants for today's finds," Vendon said.

"It was only part of a day," Rusty said. "I need to look for a stone for another tool. One that is sharper than my rotting metal." She

pulled her gatherboard onto her back and climbed out of the pit behind the others. A glance back didn't reveal anything helpful.

She followed Ambrena to where Yall rested in the shade on the huntboard Marken had left her on.

"I'm going around the brush here, to find loose firewood." Rusty said.

Ambrena nodded and checked Yall's forehead. "She's warm, not too bad though."

Brix and Jasey walked up as she finished speaking. "We'll carry her to the fire, and then come back to help."

Rusty walked around the brush. A tree had fallen in the not so distant past. She pushed through the branches, and wiggled her way into the depths to be alone.

Most dense growth areas away from Lake Kafa were small, a little larger than two lodges together. This one appeared far larger. A trail wide enough for a fox led further into the undergrowth. Excitement tingled up and down her spine at what might be hidden among the bushes. Pushing through another viney tangle, she found a small clearing around a tumble down mini-lodge.

It couldn't be a lodge, it was too small, and too hidden. Walls were so vine covered, she couldn't determine if they were made of trees, blankets, or stone. The roof didn't look right either. It had four slopes, instead of being a round slope. Shimmers and rainbows glowed under the overgrowth on the roof.

Rusty dropped the twigs she had collected. She stepped up to the entry. Inside it was dark. A light flickered along the wall at the back.

"Rusty, where are you?" Ambrena said.

"Be right there!" She stepped back. If she could share this with Ambrena, and no one else, it would be like a secret lodge from childhood dreams.

Who knew what might be lurking inside.

## Chapter 22

No visible blood on Yall's pale face.

Ambrena wasn't sure how long she could hold on. If Brael, or Dover, were there, they'd know more than she did. Watching Zande die had been awful, though even Dover and Zella couldn't help him. Her inability to save a second person so soon after the first, and one who might die of physical injuries, would have serious consequences. No one in the villas would trust her medical skills, the only skill she had trained for.

Rusty walked away from Yall, and around the brush pile. So much depended on Rusty, and her ability to find artifacts. If the Goddesses would give her the answers they needed, Ambrena could focus on healing Yall, if she could be healed.

Jasey sat beside Yall. He gently rubbed her face, much as he would touch a newborn puppy.

Brix called her to the side. "Jasey can't leave until we are safe. He may try to go tomorrow night. They know something is wrong, since he isn't back by now. Go help Rusty, and hurry back to the campsite." He walked back to Jasey and helped pick up the huntboard Yall was tied to.

The small animal trail Rusty had followed was a mess. Ambrena pushed through the tangled undergrowth and tripped over loose roots. She picked up a few small branches to carry back for firewood. "Rusty, where are you?"

"Be right there!"

Several small branches covered the ground near a log big enough to sit on. They were perfect for firewood. She picked one up and touched each of the others to be sure they weren't snakes before adding them to the pile in her arms.

The brush moved and Rusty joined her. "Are you alone?"

Ambrena nodded.

Rusty held her finger to her lips. "Found something, follow me." She pushed back through the tangled branches.

The pile of sticks for firewood tumbled to the ground.

Spider webs clung to the sides of the tangled path. Some of the spider bodies were as big as a section of her thumb, and waved their arms at her as she brushed by. Strands of web broke and tangled in her hair. Dense undergrowth like this was something she had never seen around Shells. The trail clearers kept the spider

webs back off the main walkways. The mini-lodge in the clearing was a breath of fresh air. "We can't stay long," she whispered.

Rusty nodded and stepped inside the entry with a stick in hand to deter snakes and small creatures.

"Can you see anything?" The bright sky above let in some light through the entry.

"No. There was a flashing spot earlier. Can't find it now."

Something tumbled inside the lodge.

"A rat nest, I think. There are boxes in here, like things Zella talked about, and Dover as well. I'm coming out." Rusty stepped out covered in cobwebs. "Not sure what all I saw. I wish we could explore here, and find out what this place was used for."

Rusty led the way back through the brush.

Good thing she did. Ambrena would have been lost. When they reached her stack of twigs, she picked them up. "What an exciting place. Do you think they know about it?"

"Not likely. If they do, they don't know what is there. Too many spiders to be frequently used. And yet, that floor is clearer than I would expect."

Stars shone on them as they walked back to camp. Thoughts swirled. Rusty would be excited by the find of a hidden lodge. She should be as well, though all she could think of was the dangers of spider or snake bites.

Ambrena checked on Yall. Her skin was clammy, and her eyes remained closed. She didn't respond to Ambrena's touch.

Marken glanced at her, and then away.

Elephants trumpeted as Xile led them back to the elephant lodge from the watering pond.

Marken beckoned, to beyond the fire. "The man and boy with you went to water the horses. She won't live till morning, will she?"

"I'm afraid not. I don't know anything to help, or if anyone we know would know anything to help her. We were sent to find help for illness in our own villa." Ambrena blinked.

He closed his eyes, put his hands in his lap, and nodded. "She wanted me to sponsor her first child. I don't want her to die this way."

"There are no words of comfort I know. Don't be bitter from this." Ambrena reached out and patted his shoulder.

He clasped his hands. "I won't be like Xile. I will be sad. At least a young woman wanted me while I was young."

His head drooped, and his body shuddered, as he tried to hide

the tears.

He needed an opportunity to grieve.

Ambrena walked back to her gatherboard, and picked out a pretty piece of yellow cloth. It was the only way she had to lend her comfort to him. Holding it close, she thought about its true significance in Shells. Perhaps, Marken wouldn't know its intended meaning. He hadn't moved. The yellow blended with his grey clothes when she placed the strap on his leg. It would be something for him to hold on to when Yall was no longer there.

Dried meat would make a simple crunchy soup. She broke the meat into the water bucket, and added vegetables and calming herbs. If Marken asked her what the piece of weaving meant in her villa, she would tell him. If he asked her to follow through on its promise, she didn't know if she could. Yall might be happy with the decision, or appalled. Their society might see Ambrena as a proper alternate, or they might not. She'd have to ask. Rusty would never even consider it.

Rusty glanced at her wordlessly. She knew what it meant in Shells. Would she realize it meant something different in this context?

Marken held the strip close. He did not tie it around his arm or leg to signify his feelings.

She sighed. Hopefully, he understood it was meant as a gift of peace.

The evening wore on. Mealtime was silent, except for the slurping of soup.

Yall did not wake up.

Ambrena tried to help her to sip some broth, even in her sleep. No luck.

Now, she almost feared Marken. Her stomach leapt when he came near. Warmth and confusion flooded her normal concentration.

Rusty covered her mouth, as her eyes sparkled in the firelight.

Brix and Jasey looked from one to the other, trying to figure out what had happened. They lifted their bowls to drain them. Brix did not even try to speak.

"Did Yall wake up?" Vendon asked.

Ambrena shook her head.

Before they slept for the night, Marken arranged Yall between him and her. Together, they would watch her and comfort her until she died.



Ambrena drifted in and out of sleep, afraid of what the three men might do to both the young women, and the boy, if Yall died. If Marken were on their side, he and Brix might be able to stand up against Vendon and Xile.

Rusty and Ambrena had no weapons, or training on how to use one. It was something they had never thought of in Shells. After the dark days, no one wanted to use weapons. Perhaps, that was a dangerous oversight. After all, it meant they relied on hunters, or third and fourth gen adults, to protect the villa if lions, or roamers, came around. She missed having her dog Kara with her. If she hadn't been ready to have puppies any day, she would have come along as some form of protection.

She rolled over and grasped Yall's hand. She had not been able to ask her so many important questions.

As the moon reached its height, Yall shuddered.

Ambrena's hand drifted to Yall's chest, and touched Marken's as his did the same. Her heart leapt in a way she had never known. She sat up and checked for Yall's pulse.

There was none.

Firelight flickered gently on her face, and Marken's, as he leaned over Yall's still body, no longer in pain. Tears glistened on his cheek, and slipped down his nose, onto her now bare chest.

Ambrena didn't want to wake everyone. Let him be alone with the young woman who had wanted to give him so much more than she had been able to.

She pulled back and stirred up the fire. What were Kees' death and burial rituals? Zande had been cremated, and his ashes floated on Lake Kafa. That was what they did when a person died from illness. And sometimes, those who died of old age or injury.

Vendon stumbled around the fire. "Yall?"

Ambrena lowered her head. Not before seeing the pain etched on his face in the flickering firelight. He would miss his sister, though of course, no one could know.

The fire cackled, ignoring the plight of the small group gathered around it.

"We must prepare her for burial," Vendon said.

## Chapter 23

The villa of Shims overflowed with people as Tuttle and Webbel found places to stow their belongings. Children yelled. Dogs barked louder than a normal Fall or Spring Trade. Somehow, the small villa seemed to have more people than Corandra had ever seen, even though the villa of Shells was not there. Or, maybe, because they weren't.

Ellie tried to pull away from Corandra, eager to be alone in quiet. With this many people, Shims would be a seething pot of frustration for everyone. As for herself, she could hardly expect to control her own emotions as toddlers and dogs raced around between people's legs, in front of them, and tripped several of the adults.

"Corandra!" Henry shouted. "Wait for me." A spear and several unprepared spear shafts waved as he ran toward her. He struggled to catch his breath. A small child nearly toppled him, as he stopped in front of her. "We're going to a clearing with several of the adults to train them how to use the spears. Many don't know how."

"I thought everyone learned how to use a spear when they became an adult."

Henry leaned on the spear shaft as a cane. "Most do. However, those in Webbel banned themselves from using them for two generations. Many, especially in Shells, never learned. Others have long forgotten how."

Corandra held Ellie steady. "Webbel have hunters."

"Yes, they have hunters who come from other villas." Ida said. A covered basket on her back hung low. "Even though the Webbel adults still make the tools, they do not allow themselves to use them. Their decision. Not a punishment that Dover, or Zella, or anyone else requested."

"Where are we going?" Corandra asked.

"I'll lead the way," Ida said. "It isn't far. We will still be able to hear the children." She glanced toward a running toddler who crossed her path.

"You don't think there's any danger. Do you?" Henry asked.

Ida put her finger to her mouth, and didn't say another word as she led the way out of Shims' villa.

Once out of sight of the children she turned to Henry. "Whether the danger is real, or imagined, many adults fear a return to those dark days. Except, we don't know who the roamers are. Or, why

they attacked Rusty, Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey."

"We should know our neighbors better," Henry said.

"It was Tanna and Robin's dream. I fear after this; we will know them all too well. We may not like what we learn about them." Ida's voice quavered. She pushed aside a curtain of vines.

The clearing was empty, except for Quan and Wenda, who rested on a stone bench at the far end. Quan waved to them.

Corandra turned Ellie loose to graze. "Are we really going to train people who don't know how to use spears?"

"The danger is worse than you realize. Many of our scouts have seen signs of horses, camels, and many elephants." Quan watched Ellie grazing in the clearing.

"How can you be sure the horses and camels don't belong to one of our villas?" Corandra fingered her gatherboard.

"The footprints show them galloping away," Quan said. "And we found this."

He held up a halter unlike any Corandra had seen. The halter wasn't cowhide, or horsehide. Colored stones glittered across it. Her fingers hesitated, as she reached to touch it. She pulled her hand back, and sat down.

"The stones are similar to the one I found."

Quan turned the halter and a place big enough for three missing stones showed. "You found one of the missing stones. The other two are out there, somewhere."

"It's torn. The halter and stones may have been lost in a fight." Henry touched the halter.

"We don't break things when we fight." Corandra touched his hand.

"Verbal fights can lead to physical fights, as the animals we hunt." Henry pulled away.

"Our ancestor's tales don't tell us how the physical fights began," Quan said. "We can only guess."

"I don't want to be the cause," Corandra said. "Let me leave, and they'll leave you alone."

"I think you were right last night when you said there may be more than one group of people watching our villas. It seems the group with the elephants have split off from those with horses and camels." Quan sat the halter beside him.

"That would mean they would fight amongst themselves, wouldn't it?" Henry said.

Quan's wrinkled fingers traced a line on the halter. "We can

hope. I wish I felt sure of that. However, it appears they have come separately, and to different places. Their tracks have been seen at Lava, and Tuttle, as well."

"So are we preparing for a battle on two fronts?" Corandra said.

Quan nodded. "Best to be prepared. When Lava arrives, we'll know more."

Adults entered the clearing. A few walked empty handed and slow, as if they were not sure where to go. Others strode in purposely, carrying spears. Some whispered to each other, while others stood still, waiting on someone to tell them what to do.

Corandra silently groaned. No surprise they were afraid. If she were an untrained one, she would have walked into the clearing, taken a spear from one of the people with extras, and demanded training at once. Not one of them did.

A basket of spears passed through the vine-clad entrance, followed by Lavina. "Line up everyone, and face the villa we must protect."

Wenda and Ida joined Lavina to prepare everyone for the spear training challenge.

Corandra sat on the bench beside Quan. She knew how to throw a spear, thanks to Henry. Not enough to train anyone else. Once she saw how others did, she could compete, to see who could throw the most distance, and most accurate.

Quan stood up to address the crowd milling about. "My fellow Pit Miners we're not sure what danger is out there. Living memory has not given us such events as have occurred recently. We do not know what will happen. There may be one group, or two. Four members of our villas are missing. These roamers are not random roamers. This is not two young adults willfully choosing to leave the safety of their villas. Practice today for your safety, and ours."

Her face reddened. Corandra thought of her own journey, and return, not so long ago. No, Ambrena and Rusty would never choose to go off on their own.

"Watch them closely. You will choose who will go with you, and who will stay to guard us." Quan sat down beside Corandra.

Wenda, Ida, and Lavina set up practice targets. The people moved around, forming lines, and practiced balancing their spears.

"Won't we all be together?" Corandra squeezed the rock in her hand.

"Look at the number of people. Do you honestly think you can speak loud enough to be heard by nearly sixty people at once? Or

see the hunting signs?" Quan placed the halter beside her.

A woman threw a spear. Instead of going toward the target, it went straight up, and then back down a few feet in front of her.

"And not give your position away." Henry sat down beside them. "Besides, only some will be able to throw accurately. Others will be able to aim and scare off intruders. We need an even split here, and on the trail."

"I wish Zella and Tanna were here. They managed to protect us during Blake's troubled days. Do you know how Quan?"

He shook his head. "No, I wasn't with them. I wish I had been. Now, we can't wait to learn their knowledge. I wouldn't want to add to their worries. They have enough to be concerned about."

Ida, Wenda, and Lavina attempted to train the unaccustomed people how to use spears. If it weren't so serious, it would've almost been funny. Some of the spears rose up in the air well over the targets. Others went around the targets, and stuck in the brush toward Shims.

When one woman from Webbel aimed her spear, it went straight into the ground. Almost in front of her. She would trip and fall over it, stand up, and try again. Ida worked with her, trying to improve her release at the right position. Finally, she took the spear and gave it to another person to try.

Ida didn't give up working with the woman though. She left the clearing, and returned, carrying a round wooden ball. She handed the object to the woman. "I know you play some of the games. Try rolling this toward the target. You won't be able to hit a person in the chest with this ball. It's heavy enough to knock a person down. Particularly if they aren't looking for something coming at their feet."

The woman laughed. "I do like to play the games, don't I? Let's try it."

She took the ball, lined up to the target, took two steps forward, and released the ball.

Corandra watched her carefully. Throwing a ball instead of a spear was unexpected, and unpredictable.

The ball rolled straight to the brushy target.

Quiet spread as the ball rolled.

It picked up speed. On contact, the target shuddered and tumbled. The single twig that held it snapped.

People cheered.

"I wouldn't want to be in the way of that throw," echoed across the clearing.

"Now let's try something less certain to fall over," Ida said.

She ran to the brush pile, and took two good-sized sticks, and pushed them in the ground.

The woman rolled the ball again. Both sticks broke off at the ground.

Corandra clapped her hands and cheered.

The day continued. People practiced and learned whatever skills of throwing they could master. All of them could have mastered spear throwing, or ball throwing, in a season. They had to use what they could learn in the one day.

"Who will you choose?" Quan said.

Corandra looked around the group of eager faces. "I don't know. Most of these people think of me as obnoxious. In fact, most people stay away from me. I know I'm not a nice person. I want to be better, I really do. If Ida, Wenda, and Lavina will help me, I would prefer they lead the groups."

Ida and Wenda looked at each other, and back to Corandra seated beside Quan on the bench. "We will try."

Lavina tapped her spear on the ground and said, "I will try to work with Corandra. We will go ahead and separate our groups and choose who we want to work with."

Lavina, Wenda, and Ida walked back into the crowd. Most stayed with their villa group. Ida took most of the Tuttle people. Wenda chose those from Almond, and Ida chose mostly Lava members. Brael would lead the Shims' villa in any fight.

People waited, unmoving in their groups.

Corandra glanced around and noticed they were all watching her. She glanced at Quan, who nodded. "We will all," her voice croaked. That would never do. "We will begin in the morning before the first light of day. Meet at the fire pit."

Of course, most of them were probably sleeping around the fire anyway.

Sleepy children would watch as the adults walked out into an unknown future. This opportunity to lead had to be done correctly, or Zella would never forgive her if she forgot the proper ceremonies.

Henry too would be watching.

Corandra gulped. It might be her last chance. Spear lifted, she walked through the parting crowd, and back to Shims.

## Chapter 24

Rusty woke to Ambrena crying softly by her side, and Yall's body glistening in the flickering firelight. She reached over and patted Ambrena's knee. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Yall will be buried today. I don't know where." She wiped away the tears.

Marken sat up beside her. "I've never known anyone to die here, so I have no idea."

"Are Vendon and Xile awake?" Rusty peered over the fire.

"They went to see what tools we have to bury her. We usually bury in the river, and it's not possible here."

"Do you mind if we talk about something else?" Rusty asked. Memories of the Kafa Goddess and Blake came unbidden. She hadn't been there when Blake was swallowed. The tale was a common one used to convince children to be good throughout the villa. Zande had even heard it from her once, when he refused to clean up a mess he had made. It hadn't seemed real; the day she repeated it. Now, it felt very real.

Marken placed his hand beside Yall. "I can tell you more when you tell me what's on your mind."

"Do the people from Kees explore much here? Is digging all they do here?" Rusty shook her head to clear the images of giant water monsters. The mini-lodge, and whether Vendon and Xile knew about it, was what mattered now.

He laughed gently. "Digging is their primary reason for coming. They stay out of the bushes and dense undergrowth. People from Kees prefer the open places, and water. I'm not originally from Kees. I came from further down the river, on the east bank."

Rusty picked up a stick and drew absentmindedly in the dirt. "We found something yesterday, while Brix and Jasey brought Yall over here."

"Figured you found it. I don't think anyone from Kees has ever been back in that brush. Maybe many generations ago; before the brush grew so deep. I saw it last fall, and enjoyed the place to sit peacefully and quietly in the evening. Yall went with me twice."

"I want to explore it," Rusty said. "If Vendon would allow us to."

Brix and Jasey crawled over to join them.

Marken glanced at them and back to her. "He might allow you to, if he doesn't know what you're doing. With the funeral preparations

this morning, you might be able to. I'm not sure what his plan is. We can't bury her in the watering hole. While there are plenty of watering holes around, we wouldn't want her body to stay in one place forever. It should flow to the sea. It would be two days to take her to the river, and two days back."

An elephant trumpeted.

Vendon wouldn't knowingly allow them to explore. Marken was right. They would have to find artifacts for Vendon; and soon if they wanted any hope of returning to Shells before winter.

"Are you all awake and ready to start the day?" Vendon strode back into the circle of firelight.

"We're awake," Marken said.

"Good. I trust Rusty has a plan for digging today, as soon as Yall is buried."

"No plan. Where will she be buried?"

Vendon snarled. "That is none of your business, or Marken's. You will go with Marken and stay with him until we call for you. Xile and I will see to Yall's burial. See if you find anything in that pit we dug in yesterday. Don't you dare run away either."

Rusty fought back a grin. Of course. They wouldn't be expected to be at her funeral. Perhaps it was better if they didn't know where she was buried. Vendon and Xile wouldn't treat her with the respect Marken, or even Brix and Jasey would.

Marken gasped. "She chose me."

"You did not give her a child. She wasn't ready. You may leave her something to remember you by in the afterlife."

Marken reached into his gatherboard and pulled out a tiny, shiny, clear object. He took her left hand, wrapped it around the object, kissed it, and rested it on her chest. He placed a dried four-leaf clover under her hand. A tear dropped on her forehead.

He struggled to speak as he picked up his gatherboard. "Come on, we will go discuss a dig plan near the brush pile where Yall waited yesterday."

Rusty patted Yall's hand, and then picked up her gatherboard to follow behind Marken. Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey would do the same. They did not glance back. Perhaps it was better not to know. Yall's death had given them a chance, one they could not waste. Her sacrifice would bring hope to more than one community.

Marken led them to the place where Yall had stayed the day before.

A giggle snuck up on Rusty. It was wrong to laugh after a death,



even though she was thankful it gave them an opportunity they would not have had otherwise. They walked around to the side where the path snuck into the undergrowth.

Vendon and Xile couldn't see them.

Rusty rested her gatherboard against a tree. "It's in there, we can find it."

Marken nodded. "Rusty don't be afraid to laugh. I can tell you wanted to, when you thought that we would have a chance to explore. I want to know what it is to, and maybe it can help us."

"What is it?" Brix asked.

"I didn't have a chance to tell you about the mini-lodge we found," Ambrena said. "We aren't sure what it is, or was. We better hurry."

Rusty pushed through the underbrush. Footprints from the day before led them along the trail.

Marken followed and brushed the footprints away with twigs, so Vendon and Xile couldn't sneak up on them easily.

Vines covered the walls of the lodge. Everything appeared as untouched as the previous day. A squirrel chattered at them from the roof and bounced back into the brush canopy.

Brix walked up to the entry. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"I went in yesterday. Do you think we can cut down some of the vines? At least over the windsun."

Brix fingered the stone walls. "It might make it weak. Wouldn't want it to tumble. Where is the windsun?"

"Almost opposite the entry." Rusty looked around for a loose cutting stone.

"I found a stone that will work." Brix went on around the corner of the lodge with Jasey.

Marken pointed to the roof. "That material on the top looks similar to the glass Kees uses to grow their food."

There were plenty of vines across the material, whatever it was. Once the vines were off, Marken would know if it was the same.

"How does the glass help you grow food?" Ambrena asked.

Marken pointed a stick at the roof. "It's always warm underneath the cover. During the summer, it's too hot to grow anything. During the winter, the vegetables grow perfect."

"If he has searched for it so long before, doesn't Vendon have enough glass?" Rusty asked.

"We always lose some. It breaks and shatters so easy. We also have to find metal to make the pieces that are melted to prepare the

parts that move the boats through the water."

"What are they called?" Ambrena asked.

Marken grinned. "I never asked, and no one said. My villa uses different terms than Kees does. As a gardener who likes to trade with the boating people, I didn't learn the boat terminology. I think they are the part called a prop in my villa, though I can't be sure. All those words run together to me. Especially since I hear similar parts called a dozen names from the trade groups."

The noise on the other side of the lodge stopped. Brix and Jasey trudged back to where they stood, stamping a pathway through the vines around the mini-lodge. "Rusty, you can go in. Be careful."

She picked up a stick and walked in the entryway. Once again, something flickered on the other side. Almost as if it was a warning, or maybe something the ancients wanted her to find.

The light through the entry and windsun wasn't enough. "Brix, can you trim the roof vines please?"

"We can cut off the vines, and maybe pull them to the side a little. It might weaken the walls. Stay outside while we do so." Brix waited until she and Ambrena were as far away from the mini-lodge as they could be in the tiny clearing.

Brix used the stone to cut the vines close to the roof. He took a branch and pulled them over to one side. Dirt and dust tumbled to the ground.

Marken stepped forward to look at the unusual roof. "It does look a lot like our garden plots, I wonder if this was used as an example. You should have plenty of daylight now."

Rusty stepped inside. Sunlight didn't come through the roof as Marken thought it would. It did come through the uncovered windsun. There didn't appear to be any small creatures living inside. However, there were plenty of leaves and dirt.

Along one wall, a dusty wooden table teetered. Underneath was a large plastic box, with a lid that hung loosely on one side. Above, on the right side three plastic pieces; a square, a rectangle, and an oval, covered the dusty board. A tall plastic square on the left side of the table was the one that interested Rusty. Where it sat was where she had seen the flickering the day before, and a little while ago. She walked over and touched it. It gleamed and felt moist.

A bird fluttered in the entryway and landed next to the square box on the table. It startled Rusty, and she jumped backwards, almost falling.

"Be careful." Brix watched from the entry.

Rusty sat down next to the box under the table, careful to not touch the leaning table above her. There didn't appear to be much in there, mostly tattered remains of paper. Odd place for it to have survived. It appeared as if several creatures had used this box as a nest over the gens. Brittle plastic cracked at her touch. Crumbled dusty paper slid out onto the dry dirt floor.

A flickering from the tall square on the table distracted her from the box in front of her. What could it be? She rose up on her knees to look at it.

The tall thin box glimmered in the light from the windsun. It reminded her of lightning high in the clouds, not a true flash, more of subtle coverage. A long, flat, narrow piece was black, with a green speck peeking out of one corner. The oval and the long piece were attached to a large square behind them. They were not as dusty as the table. Rusty leaned closer to observe it. A faint hum seemed to come from the square. Strange. Her heart fluttered as she remembered the plastic talking piece Blake had found.

Another flicker from the tall square disturbed her. Rusty touched the tall square to rub the dust off.

Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey walked in.

"What is it?" Ambrena asked.

"I don't know. Marken do you know?" She turned to the entry where Marken stood.

He shook his head and stepped into the mini-lodge. "I've never seen anything like it other than here. I didn't stay inside long last fall when I came. I'd sit outside and listen to the birds and the squirrels."

"I'll see if I can pull this hand sized piece away. If we can wipe the dust off of it, we might be able to figure out what it is." Rusty tried to pull it away from the square. It wouldn't move far. Two ropes attached it to the other pieces.

"I'll have to wipe them carefully," she said. She rubbed more dust off, and began to recognize letters. Letters that Zella had taught them. They were barely visible in the dim light.

She pointed to the letters and read them aloud, "Q, W, E, R, and they go on. That isn't a word, is it? Are they some kind of secret code?" Rusty glanced back at Ambrena and the men.

"No idea." Marken said. "I think we better return to the fire pit. Vendon will be looking for us soon. Maybe we can come back this evening."

"Let me look at it," Ambrena said. "I won't be long."

Ambrena stepped up beside Rusty, and looked at the three

pieces of plastic. The big one she touched gently. Nothing happened. The flickering continued. She tapped the long thin piece in front of the square, and jumped back. "It wiggled. We better go. I need to think over the lore."

Rusty followed the men out of the lodge. "What do you think it is?"

Ambrena lagged behind. At the entry, she turned and leaned against the wall. "No idea. We'll figure it out."

## Chapter 25

Ambrena followed the others out of the lodge. Something nagged at the back of her mind. It had to be important. "Don't say anything to Vendon or Xile, if they don't already know."

"I'm sure they don't." Marken pushed the brush aside in front of her. "There's no reason to think they know. If they did, they'd have taken the glass on the roof back to Kees long ago."

They pushed on through the overgrown vegetation. Their gatherboards waited for them at the edge of the brush pile.

"We should go on to the pit," Rusty said.

Marken shook his head. "We'll go back to the fire and eat before we dig."

When they arrived, Vendon and Xile glared and laughed. "Been off having fun, I see. You couldn't wait until after Yall had been buried, could you?"

Ambrena trembled. If those men had any idea what the piece of material meant that she had given to Marken then they would have reason to believe what Vendon had said. She wanted to scream they were wrong. Her hands clenched. If she told them they were wrong, then they would question where the five had been.

Marken glanced back at her.

She shook her head.

Marken sighed. "A man must leave his grief behind somehow."

Rusty drew her breath in and glanced at Ambrena.

Her heat beat wildly. Could Brix protect her, if Vendon made the decision many roamers would in a circumstance like this?

Vendon laughed. "You aren't a man. Until a woman says a child is sponsored by you and has lived for four seasons, you are not a man, regardless of the customs of the burb you come from."

"We need to work," Xile said. "I'll be keeping my eye on all of you."

Marken gulped and turned toward the pit.

Ambrena tried to relax the tense muscles in her arms and legs. It wasn't easy. A palm-sized rock nearly tripped her.

Rusty stared down at the pit they had worked in the day before. Her toe didn't touch the downward slope.

"Hurry up and climb down here." Vendon shoved a bucket over the edge. It clanged on the bottom and rolled to a stop at Jasey's feet.

"It's empty Vendon. We aren't going to find anything. You know it. What part of this open space hasn't been dug in previous generations?" Rusty placed her hands on her hips.

It was a risk. Pushing him now could be dangerous. Her legs shook.

Vendon slumped to the ground and clutched his face.

Hitting him with the truth so soon after his sister's death wasn't the safest thing to do.

It might be the best way to escape. Even saving the rest of Kees didn't matter to Ambrena anymore. She wanted to go back to Shells, with Tanna, Zella, and Dover. It might mean giving up her status as a skilled gen two adult for another season. Being an adult didn't matter anymore. The safety of her childhood did.

"Tell me where to dig that hasn't been dug out already," Rusty said.

"The only place I know of, is around the elephant lodge." Vendon reached for the bucket.

Rusty gripped her gatherboard. "Then that is where we will go. If you want to find what you are looking for."

Vendon glared at her. "It will weaken the lodge foundation."

Rusty's eyes closed. "Show me the walls. Perhaps, your elephants can move them, while we start at one corner on the outside. Xile can move the walls while we work."

It might work if he let them do it.

It was good to see Rusty taking heart again, and leading as she always had. All it took was one external catastrophe to override a more personal one.

Marken hid a grin behind his hand.

Vendon nodded. "We can try. You'll scare the animals with all the dust and commotion."

Brix and Jasey picked up their huntboards.

Ambrena followed close behind. While Rusty was choosing a new spot to dig, perhaps she could think over the tales. If she could talk with Rusty, or Brix, they might know something, or be able to awaken a memory she had forgotten. Even Jasey might know something, though how he could convey his memories clearly, she wasn't sure.

Marken bumped her elbow from behind.

She glanced back.

A smile lit his face. He motioned her to hurry.

At the top of the pit, he turned to Vendon. "I need to show Rusty

how we use the water scoops. Ambrena too. The scoops may help us dig later today and tomorrow. They can choose a better spot faster if they know how it works. Xile can look for the easiest part of the elephant lodge to move. With Brix and Jasey, they should be fine. We'll be back quickly."

Vendon snorted. "Take the three horses, if you are going to the water pond."

Marken grinned and raced ahead.

Rusty grabbed her arm, and they ran after him.

Larger than an average herd lodge, the enormous walls were expected to keep the elephants inside.

At the entry to the elephant lodge, they dissolved in giggles. The horses ran to them, along with the camel.

"Guess we can take all four?"

"Sure, why not?" Marken reached out to the camel.

The camel snorted.

Jasey took her head, and held it close to Marken. He lightly patted her rump to follow behind the horses.

Before long, they had reached the pond with the three horses and the camel. The animals stepped in for a drink.

"Okay, sit down." Marken searched around on the ground.

"I can't find what I need to show you. Blades of grass will have to do." He pulled some blades and connected them quickly together. Placed in the water, he tried to spin them around.

"These don't work well. However, with the right tools, the ones Kees builders make, do work. We have them at Kees, and need more. We lost many in the storm."

Rusty's eyes lit up. "You mean like this?"

She scrambled in her gatherboard, and pulled out the object Dan had given her. Holding it up in the bright sunlight, a light breeze touched its four wooden wings, and they circled.

Marken touched it gently. "Similar. Not exactly. Where did you find that?"

Rusty's eyes clouded. "Dan kept it. To give it to me or Henry when we became adults. He thinks it's from Mills."

"It'll be helpful, when we figure out what it is," Ambrena said.

"I think it's a toy," Rusty said. "We better hurry. Vendon will be waiting."

They walked slowly back to the elephant lodge, with the horses and camel trailing behind. Jasey waited at the entry. The horses passed through. A puzzled look crossed his face. He made a sign

and motion with his left hand.

His camel nuzzled him. As his pet turned to go in the entry, Jasey slapped her rump hard. The camel startled, jumped backwards, turned around, and raced away, leaving a trail of dust behind her.

Jasey smiled. A tear trickled down his dust covered face. He held a finger to his lips.

Ambrena smiled. He had a plan.

Marken nodded and squeezed her hand.

She glanced over at him. He was probably in as much danger as they were, now that Yall was dead. His smile and nod to Jasey indicated he understood, and would follow their lead. How ever it ended for all of them.



## Chapter 26

Firelight glistened as the Pit Miners ate around the Shims' fire pit. Children played and sang. Dogs snoozed; unless a child pulled their tail.

Corandra and Henry sat with Brael, Quan, Lavina, and Ida on the outside of the circle.

"I want to be a scout out front," Corandra said.

Henry covered his eyes.

Lavina took her hands. "How can you lead us, if you are ahead of us? We need you in the middle, to relay your messages to the group."

"If I'm with you, I'm not really leading. I'm following along. I have to find them. It's my fault."

"We've already covered this," Ida said. "The scouts will go ahead. You will stay with the rest of the rescue group. We will tie Ellie to the other horses if necessary. Or leave you here with Brael."

Corandra fumed. Why wouldn't they let her go by herself? She really didn't think there were two groups of roamers waiting to attack. There couldn't be. The hunters would have known. "Fine. I'll follow."

A dog leapt over her lap, and a laughing small child tumbled right into it. The boy struggled to sit up, tears racing down his cheeks. He looked so much like Zande, Corandra gasped.

The toddler teetered as Ida lifted him off her lap and wiped away his tears.

Too many people crowded into the villa center. Shims had never been intended for multi-villa gatherings, though the stilted lodges gave them a bit more room than other villas would have.

Corandra hurried to the fire to avoid as many as she could. She stirred the fire and ignored the crowd around her. If people came up to speak, she never heard them. Instead, she focused inward. Or, maybe outward, onto the fire. Goddess Kafa, or even Goddess Amber should have taken her irritable life, instead of the wanted Zande, and maybe even Ola by now. Sighing, she took a step forward.

A hand grabbed her elbow.

"Don't you dare step into the fire," Henry said. "We need your help. We can't leave you here, covered in burns, a burden to those few of Shims who stay."

Tears poured out of her eyes. "I wanted to give myself, and bring them back. Like Ambrena's mother."

Henry pulled her close. "You can't bring Zande back. Stop punishing yourself."

His words whispered in her hair, sent a tingle down her back.

He pulled away, and held her at arm's length. "Ambrena's mother was hurt, as were many others, and did not feel they could go on living without hurting others. Is that how you feel?"

She nodded and tried not to blubber.

He closed his eyes, and then opened them, to look deep into hers. "Promise me you won't do anything to hurt yourself. Or disappear, until we find Rusty and Ambrena."

"I should go alone."

"Corandra, you are stubborn. We don't know who took them, or why. If they could have come back to Shims, they would have by now. They have Brix and Jasey, after all. You are closest to Rusty and Ambrena. You know more of the secrets they know, than any of us. Symbols, a turned leaf, anything a fellow hunter or scout may overlook, you will recognize the significance of, because they are your best friends."

Not really. Not anymore, anyway. Rusty would probably refuse to look at her. "I need to be out front," Corandra said.

"If you promise you won't run off, you and I can stay ahead of Lavina, Wenda, and Ida, okay? We have to stay where the scouts can find us easily. And you can still see clues that haven't been trampled."

"Why don't you despise me like everyone else?" She tried to look into his eyes, though the flickering firelight didn't make that easy.

He let go and looked at the fire. "No one despises you. Your behavior, perhaps. No matter what anyone says, I'll never dislike you."

"Have you heard what they say?"

He nodded. "And I know a few of the tales Zella used to tell. If we are anything like people in our past, it will take both of us to set right the wrongs of the generation before us."

"You mean my sponsor."

"And mine."

"Your sponsor died too."

The firelight crackled and lit Henry's face. "How do we know for what reason he came to Old Shells? How do we know why he left Mills? I intend to find out someday. And, I need you to go with me."

Whatever he brought, or intended to bring, is what brought the downfall of both of our sponsors."

"He was a good sponsor. Rusty said so."

"He may well have been. That doesn't mean he was a good man. I intend to find out." Henry kicked a stick into the burning coals.

"Go to sleep, if you both want to be ready to go in the morning," Brael said. "Come along to my lodge."

Corandra lagged behind. Henry might be right. Only partially. A good sponsor is a good man. What had he brought, and why? Ever with a one-track mind, she'd agreed to find Rusty and Ambrena and bring them back. Then, she would find the real answers to their past.

Before morning even dawned, the search party assembled on the edge of the clearing.

"I'll lead until we reach the place I found the blood," Wenda said. "Scouts have been out since yesterday searching for more signs nearby."

Wenda led off on her camel, with Corandra and Henry close behind. Without enough horses and camels for everyone, the pace would be slow. The healthiest people would travel. Some who trained the day before would stay in Shims to help guard the children and those less able to travel. Children had gathered several piles of stones, to be used as weapons if needed.

By daybreak, they reached the place Wenda had indicated.

"Look Corandra, what do you see?"

The grass had been trampled in confusion. A footprint looked like Ambrena's, next to the dried blood. Another, nearby resembled Rusty's.

"They were walking. And I think they rested here. It's been several days; we better go on." She urged Ellie forward, following the track.

Henry rode behind, and off to the side of her track.

At least the elephant path was well trampled, and easy to follow. Corandra tried to remember what she could of Jasey and Brix. They would have tried to leave some sign behind if they were safe. There had been no sign of burial, or burning, at the bloody spot. So whoever was hurt must have lived, at that point, anyway.

Ellie paused to nibble on some grass. She picked something up and turned her head around.

Corandra took a braided grass and flower circlet from her lips. "I think Jasey made it."

Henry took it. "Could be, it's promising at least."

Ellie sprinted east, until they reached a wide track going north and south.

Now was Corandra's chance to prove her tracking abilities. Northward, there was no sign of anything living. Southward, a hazy sky obscured the fresh trail. Not even small creatures ran across the open track. The north to south track had been made more recently than the track they were on.

And to think, her sponsor, and his death, as the stories told it had brought her to this lonely, desolate place. The death of Blake, the Webbel leader, had been two fold, fiery ant bites while tied up next to a log, and then fed to the Goddess Kafa, because he could not be saved, even if he had deserved to live. That lakeside memory had imprinted on her brain, even though she had never seen it. The fireside tales would dance before her closed her eyes forever.

"What do you think?" Henry said.

"We haven't heard anything from the scouts. I'm going ahead to check across the path."

"We are near a river. We never hunt beyond it," Wenda said.

"Do dangerous people live on the other side?" Corandra turned to the hunter.

"People we don't know travel it. We aren't sure where they belong. They've never spoken to any hunter that I know of."

"Stay here, until I make it across the path," Corandra said. "We'll check this river, and find out what it is hiding."

Wenda handed her an extra spear.

Corandra urged Ellie on, beyond the lifeless pathway. She didn't stop to see if the crowd behind her followed. Her senses focused on the sounds of running water far ahead. The babble of the Pit Miners diminished behind her.

A sudden rush of wind startled her.

Ellie screeched and escaped along the path.

Henry screamed.

Corandra managed to hold on.

A darkened tree-like blur dashed in front of Ellie.

Ellie snorted, and tried to run to the right.

Corandra turned to face the shadow as it focused into a dark male shape.

Henry's horse snorted, as a dark skinned person grabbed his harness and held it still.

The man pointed a spear at Henry's face. "Food!"

"Have none." Henry sat tall and calmly.

The man raised his spear. "Hungry."

Wenda rode up, alone. No one else in sight. "We have a little food. When did you last eat?"

The man grunted. "Too long."

Corandra glanced around the Grass Sea, as tall she when standing. Dark spots everywhere, probably people from an unknown group, all around the three of them. Hopefully, the rest of the Pit Miners had safely backed away.

Wenda's horse shifted nervously, as ten people with spears surrounded her and Henry, and ignored Corandra.

"Kees took what food we managed to grow this dry season." The man said.

Wenda shifted to control her horse. "We would help you if we could. We are searching for a lost group of people."

Henry lifted his right hand in a fist and moved it toward the man with the spear.

The speaker for the group waved his spear.

Another jumped on the horse behind Henry and raced away with him.

The dark people faded back into the grasses.

Corandra jerked Ellie to go after Henry and his horse.

A spear was thrown at them.

Ellie stopped.

"Let them go."

"Henry."

Wenda took her hand and whispered. "They want the horse for food. He will escape, or Ida will find him. Wait here until these people leave."

Corandra sat on Ellie and waited. She had to choose to rescue Henry, or try to find Rusty and Ambrena. Regardless of what Wenda said. Who was in the most danger would be most important. The rest of them could go find Rusty and Ambrena following this easy trail. Henry was alone.

Zella and Dover expected her to take care of him.

Ellie started toward the trail Henry's horse had made.

A low bleating sound stopped her in her tracks.

Running directly down the trail towards them was a young camel, maybe a season older than Ellie.

"Jasey's camel," Wenda said.

Now the choice was clear.

Rusty, Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey would never turn a villa's

animal loose if they were alive.

As much as she argued with Henry, she couldn't bear the thought of him not being there to argue with. Others would turn away and ignore her, while he would spar equally.

She turned her head both directions, trying to decide.

Corandra could follow Henry's horse, or allow Ida to find him.

Or, race down the camel's path to find the remains of her friends, with Wenda and the rest of the Pit Miners.

## Chapter 27

Rusty grinned at the interplay between Marken and Ambrena. Two who should be enemies fast becoming friends. Corandra should see this in action. Marken wasn't all bad. Vendon and Xile she wouldn't trust in any known villa. Dangerous, more like Blake and Orid. Their voices sent a shiver up her spine.

"Hey, how about over here," Vendon yelled. "The ground is softer, and we might be able to pull out the elephant lodge stones."

Rusty grabbed Jasey's hand and ran to see where he pointed. Without looking up at Vendon's leering hairy face, she studied the ground inside the lodge. She nudged a lump or two of elephant dung with her toe. The dung would have loosened the ground, and with former rains might actually help artifacts float to the top, to be trampled by elephants the next season.

"Let me dig here, a finger width or so and see," she said.

Vendon growled. "Hurry."

Rusty reached into her gatherboard for her digging tools. The wooden artifact almost fell out. If Vendon saw it, he didn't say anything.

She pulled the gatherboard in front of her and scooped off a layer of dirt and dung. There would be plenty of dung here, several generation's worth. Excellent gardening soil; and a heating source for the winter.

If she could take some back to Shells.

She gulped. If the four of them ever managed to escape. With Marken's help, they might be able to escape at night. Then, however, Vendon and Xile would be free to follow them, whenever they wished, and would be a danger to their villas. Especially, if they returned with more people from Kees. A repeat in a worse way of the violence of her childhood, more like the violence before the great grandmothers of today remembered. Violence between villas who did not know each other.

Her whole body trembled as she pulled away the loose ground. She couldn't let that happen.

Jasey knew what he was doing, she hoped.

She glanced up at him and tried to smile.

He pointed at the dirt.

There, in the ground was a glittery object.

"Here will be fine."

Vendon grunted and waved to Xile. Together, they herded five of the elephants, and the three horses to the other end of the elephant lodge.

Rusty continued to dig with Ambrena by her side.

"Look, a piece of glass someone dropped."

Ambrena nodded, concentrating on removing the soil nearby.

Brix, Jasey, and Marken had chosen places a little further away.

"You okay?" Rusty said.

Ambrena's hair framed her face as she looked up at Rusty. "I think so. I feel not quite right is all. I am thinking back through all my training, trying to figure out what is wrong with me. I don't think Yall had a catching sickness."

Rusty covered her mouth and laughed. She sat back on her heels. "Marken, can you bring us some water to drink, please?"

Ambrena glanced at her and at Marken. Her hands reached toward him. "I'd rather he didn't leave us alone with Vendon and Xile working over there."

"He only has to go to the entry. He'll be right back." Rusty watched her intently.

Brix pretended to dig, while watching as well.

Ambrena's eyes followed every step Marken took.

"I wouldn't worry. I think I know what you're feeling. It'll pass."

Rusty smiled.

Ambrena's fingers shook as she took the water gourd. Her face turned red.

Marken turned away.

Intense situations could lead to many unexpected feelings. Zella said it could happen. Like Dan and Nala at their age.

Vendon and Xile had ropes around two of the stones, and the elephants hooked up. Elephants pulled at the harness; ready to tug at Xile's command.

"You five better go back to your brushy explorations while we pull these down. Wouldn't want you to be hurt." Vendon laughed.

Rusty didn't need to be told twice. She drew a quick circle in the dirt, grabbed her tools, and her gatherboard. "We'll be back when the ground stops shaking."

"You better hope we can move these without breaking them. We will have to move several, so you may have most of the day. Stay nearby."

Rusty glanced back as they reached the entry.

Xile urged the elephants to pull on the stones.



Vendon watched them leave with an almost wistful look on his face.

Near the campfire, Brix stopped. "Do you need us?"

Rusty looked from Ambrena to Marken and back at Brix.

Brix pointed his spear away from the brush. "Supplies are low. We can snare a rabbit, and bring water. Maybe catch something larger near the thicket between your mini-lodge and the pond. We won't be any further away than you, and they'll understand, or go hungry."

"We should be safe," Rusty said. "Our smell is all over the place now."

Jasey patted her arm.

At least her smell was.

Brix picked up a rock and turned to the pond. "We'll join you, if possible. They know we can't leave without the horses." He led Jasey, pointing out places and objects Rusty could barely glimpse.

"Let's go," Marken said. "I can hardly wait to see what we find."

Ambrena giggled and ran ahead.

Marken chased after her.

Rusty shook her head. How could Ambrena be interested in him? Of course, he was the nicer of the roamers. He wasn't really one of them, or so he said. He seemed trustworthy; they'd know soon enough.

She lagged behind.

"I'll have to leave when you do," Marken said. "Vendon never did like me, and now, they won't tolerate me. If I'm lucky, they'll send me on a raiding mission to Tree Burb and the people there will kill me."

"They raid people?" Ambrena said.

He nodded. "Kees stole food from them last season, and again this season. We had outgrown our food supply, and Tree Burb, a small group, were nearby. I didn't want to be part of it. Luckily, I came here last season. This season, they'd recognize and kill me. I did it so Yall wouldn't starve."

"That's awful! What are the Tree Burb people like?" Ambrena said.

Rusty passed them and walked into the mini-lodge.

"They are skinny, and have darker skin than ours. Like the legends. That's why they are called Tree Burb. They never did Kees any harm; that I know of. Certainly, they never harmed my burb."

The tall box on the table flickered. More than it had earlier in the day. Rusty reached to it, and jumped back when she felt a warm

glow encircle her hand.

"It's good you tried to stay away from them." Ambrena stood in the entry.

He laughed. "I've seen them on the river. They have their own style of boats, and their own river. They use words I've never heard before in my travels, though we could talk about common items, or ideas clearly enough. Why Vendon and Xile decided to attack them instead of ask for help, I'll never know."

Marken and Ambrena were supposed to be clearing the brush around the mini-lodge.

Rusty decided to ignore the rest of the conversation. After all, she had work to do. She wiped the smaller box Ambrena had started cleaning earlier. More letters and other marks appeared.

"Anything?" Ambrena walked up beside her.

Rusty nodded. "Looks like something. We should know what it is."

"Or I should, since I studied the lore more than you."

"I lived with Zella longer than you."

"Tanna knows as much she does!"

"Do you two always argue like this?" Marken laughed.

Rusty closed her eyes. "No, never. We usually only argue with Corandra. I miss her."

Ambrena's hand covered hers. "So do I. I think if Corandra weren't that way, someone else, or many, would be. Let's look at these better. Can we pull them outside in the sunlight?"

Rusty picked up the small rectangular lettered piece. It pulled partially away, with a long rope stretched out behind it. "It seems to be attached by this."

Ambrena reached for the box in her hand. She twisted it this way and that, trying to focus as much light on it as she could. "It is unusual. Let's look at the little egg shape beside it."

Rusty placed the long, thin rectangle on the table and reached for the smaller hand-sized egg shape. It too was covered with the dust and dirt of ages past. Who knew how long it had sat here; and what damage the weather may have done.

Behind those two pieces, a dusty grey square was snug against the entry wall. She wiped the dust off. Nothing special about it, and no way to open it to store anything in it. How could the ancients have used it? It must've served a purpose, once.

Somehow, it had survived many gens without animals tearing it up. How could that have happened? Her fingers ran down the sides

of the box. In two places, something stuck out of the box. She gently touched them.

One of the pieces fell out.

Ambrena gasped. "It looks almost like Goddess Amber's ancient artifact."

"If we had it with us, we could find out." Rusty picked up the piece and turned it around in her hand.

"I have it," Ambrena said. "It's in my gatherboard. I'll go out into the sunlight to find it."

Marken followed behind her.

Looking at it wouldn't tell them what it had been used for. It could mean anything. The piece that she held in her hand was about the same length as her finger, a little thinner, with a piece of metal at the end. The metal end had stuck into the box.

Ambrena laughed.

Rusty looked up.

"I found it. Now, let's see what it does."

## Chapter 28

Ambrena raced into the mini-lodge with the artifact in hand. She took the one the Rusty had, and held them up side by side in the sunlight. "Not quite the same. I wonder if it'll fit."

"Wait, don't try anything," Marken said. "Wouldn't want to break the artifact if it doesn't."

He took the two pieces and held them together. "In fact, I'm not sure we should do anything until Brix and Jasey return."

"I'll go find them." Rusty turned to go out the entry.

He touched her hand. "What they are doing is important. I think they're keeping an eye on Vendon and Xile as well. Wait till they come. Let's go over the lore. It may help."

"We know our lore. What lore does your villa share?" Ambrena led the way outside, to sit and wait in the sunshine.

Marken sat beside her. "We call our villa a burb. Though, I'm not from Kees. I'm from one of the smaller burbs down the river. We trade with Kees. When we have anything to spare. That's how I met Yall."

His hands reached up to wipe away a tear. "I hoped by joining them, they wouldn't attack my burb like they do the Tree Burb."

"So they aren't nice, normally?" Rusty asked.

Marken drew a deep breath. "It's hard to say. It seems every few seasons they attack someone along the river. My birth burb raises elephants for Kees, so they won't attack us. Usually. I think they're used to being in charge and telling others what to do. Somehow, I don't think your villas would have been safe much longer either."

"Shelpit is almost empty too. We have to find another mine for the Pit Miners to go to. Everywhere we know of is empty, and our ancestors have sorted them for gens." Rusty picked up a few leaves to twirl.

Ambrena listened to them talk, and tried to think. There was something she had forgotten. Everyone had forgotten. The Goddess Amber had taken many things from them, saying they didn't need them anymore. What had they done with what the Goddess had given them? They had continued to search for the memories of their ancestors. Perhaps they were supposed to make new memories. There had to be another way to relearn the good forgotten knowledge. Without the fear, anger, and hurt of the past being part of it. She'd find it, if it could be found.

Would anyone believe her if she said this out loud? Rusty might. She'd fight it. It would mean the end of their way of life, and so many would no longer have a useful skill in the villa, as they knew it. They'd have to find a new meaning, or be one of the builders creating the objects they needed to survive.

The ground shook. More lodge stones must have been pulled down. If they broke, the elephants and horses might leave.

Ambrena ignored the conversation between Rusty and Marken. She stood up and walked to the bushes. Many useful plants grew here. Dandelions and rose bushes grew in one bower, with a tangle of iris leaves and a fern in another. This must have been a well taken care of place, once. The Goddesses, Amber, and Kafa, were trying to give her a message, if she could decipher it.

The brush rattled beside her. Jasey stepped into the clearing.

Her hand went to her chest before she realized it was him.

Blinking fast, she said, "Does Brix have snares set?"

He nodded.

"Will he come here?"

Jasey shook his head.

Ambrena held out her hand. "Come then. Let's go see what I found."

Marken and Rusty were still speaking quietly by the entry. They looked up at her and Jasey.

"I think we need to go ahead and check it," Ambrena said.

She walked through the entry and stood in front of the boxes.

Jasey, Marken, and Rusty stood behind her.

Ambrena took a deep breath, and pulled the square plastic piece to her. "It came out of here, right?"

Rusty nodded.

She took the ancestral object in her hand. Tanna or Zella should be the one trying the artifact. Not her. No one knew where her mother had come from. Her mother and sponsor were forgotten. Ambrena could be anyone, from anywhere. Perhaps, even a rattler, like Corandra. Her hands shook.

Zella had sent the artifact with her as a hopeful good luck charm. Tanna's eyes had filled with tears as she handed it to her. Ambrena had thought maybe they were tears of relief that she was leaving. Maybe they had been tears of hope. Her hands loosened their hold. The two metal ends were nearly identical. Tanna's was a little longer, and shinier.

Another deep breath, and she pushed the ancestral object into

the hole in the square piece.

Something buzzed and clicked.

Ambrena stepped back and covered her mouth with her hand.

The artifact did not fall out of the larger square.

Buzzing continued.

The tall box flickered. A picture of the mini-lodge appeared.

"Welcome friends and family."

Ambrena searched for the source of the sound. It seemed to come from the square piece. How could that be? Almost like the talking plastic rectangle Blake found, and accused Tanna of stealing.

The picture on the tall square changed to a flower covered field.

"I have no idea what you still know, and don't know. On this disk is a medical reference library, as much as I was able to save."

The voice stopped, and several thumbnail sized pictures appeared on the square.

Ambrena pointed at them. "What are they?"

Rusty stepped up beside her. "Too small to make out. And how do we find the knowledge, if we can't hear it?"

Ambrena turned to Marken. "If I take it out, and put it back in the small square, will it speak again?"

His eyes were large as he glanced from square to square. "No idea. I've never heard of a talking box before. Or one where pictures appear and disappear on the surface."

Jasey grabbed her hand.

Sticks crunched outside the lodge.

Ambrena's heart raced. She grabbed the ancestral object and pulled it out of the small box, holding it tight in her hand.

"Rusty, Ambrena, you okay?" Brix said.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "We're okay."

"I thought I heard a strange voice." He stepped into the entry.

Ambrena nodded. "The Lava ancestral tool made the square talk. Then it stopped."

Brix's eyes closed, then reopened. "Better not let it speak anymore until Vendon and Xile are gone. We'll come back later, in winter if we have to."

"Good idea." Marken stepped away from the table.

"It said it had medical knowledge. And then it stopped speaking," Rusty said. "Maybe Brael or Dover has to be here for it to speak to?"

"We will ask them soon. Come on. Let's go now, before they come looking for us." Brix led them back out to where Yall had

waited their first day in this strange place.

"Marken you will come with us. And do not speak of any of this to Vendon and Xile, understand?"

"There is nothing to share with them." Marken looked Brix in the eye.

Brix moved a pile of leaves and pulled out a pair of rabbits. He turned to walk to the fire pit. "Rusty, you cook tonight."

When they arrived back at camp, Vendon and Xile sat by the fire. "About to look for you. You can dig now; the stones are moved." Vendon looked from one to the other. "You haven't taken any fire with you, have you?"

Brix and Jasey shook their heads.

"We wouldn't," Rusty said. "It would burn us up as well."

Vendon laughed. "We'd protect our dig area."

Ambrena gulped. His words brought back a memory of a fire. A massive fire, where screams echoed throughout the darkness. She fought back a whimper.

Rusty grabbed her hand. "We will take a few of these charred logs to drag and loosen the top layer so we can dig in the morning."

Brix handed Ambrena one to carry, and she followed behind him to the now smaller elephant lodge.

As they scraped the ground, the elephants stayed on the other side. Their horses, stayed near them, almost like dogs would.

Perhaps they'd give Kara, and her pups, to Corandra if she didn't make it back. Something stable to be responsible for might help her.

Brix glanced in the direction of Shims occasionally, as if he waited on something, or someone, to arrive.

Ambrena worked, dragging away the top layer of soil and dung. The odor of elephant dung disturbed her stomach. Under a few layers, white flakes were stirred up into the air, to float down and stick in their hair, and on their bodies.

Vendon and Xile joined them, using the elephants to drag larger logs. Before long, everyone coughed from all the white powder in the air.

Marken took her wood from her. "Go for water."

She wiped the hair out of her eyes. Even though winter fast approached, sweat rolled down her back and thighs. Walking back with the water, it sloshed and dampened the ground in places.

Marken took a sip and handed the gourd to Brix. He bent down and whispered to her. "You, Rusty, and Jasey stay between me and Brix tonight. I don't trust Vendon and Xile."

She took the water from Brix, and shared it, and Marken's fears, with Rusty and Jasey.

They didn't react in any visible way.

Ambrena would rather focus on the message the box had given them. She didn't intend to sleep at all.

At dark, Vendon and Xile called a halt to the day's work. The elephant lodge was as snug as they could make it.

Around the fire, Vendon and Xile laughed and jeered, drinking from something they didn't offer to share with anyone else.

Looks passed between the five, as they stayed close together.

The fire burned low, and still no one wanted to sleep until Vendon and Xile were asleep.

Ambrena's heart raced. Her mind fluttered as she tried to think over the lore, and what the voice from the square had said. Her thoughts were interrupted so often; she gave up and reached for a few stems of grass to weave. The pattern of Yall's tunic would be easy with a few stems of varying colors.

Finally, her head sagged against Rusty's shoulder.

Marken covered her with a blanket. He sat and watched the fire.

She glanced at his form, tall and straight in the dancing shadows.

At sunrise, she woke up, stiff from the unusual position.

Brix was nearby, stirring up the fire.

She sat up, and managed to disturb Rusty, and Jasey, on the other side.

It would be a long day of digging, something only Rusty was accustomed to doing. She sighed and took the tea Brix handed her.

"Let's go and work, before Vendon and Xile wake up. They may sleep late today." Marken whispered.

They picked up their gatherboards and walked off to the elephant lodge.

"They sent me for water after you fell asleep. They'll sleep most of the day. I made sure of that." Marken opened the entry.

"Should we really work then? There is so much to do," Ambrena said.

"We have no idea when help will arrive," Brix said. "One more day is all I dare give. I don't want another night like last night. If they wake up before Brael arrives, we aren't able to fight."

"The plant will make them weaker, though it won't counteract what they chose to drink last night. Stay close, and don't take off



alone." Marken shut the entry behind them.

Ambrena chose a place to dig. If she could be alone to think it would help. The place where she spoke to Goddess Amber came into her mind.

Her horse came over and stood nearby, blocking the sight of the others.

Marken came behind it, and stayed where he could see her.

The thought of what he was protecting her from chilled her to the bone. She knew he and Brix were right. The five of them couldn't easily fight off Vendon and Xile.

They couldn't run.

If they did, they'd never sleep in safety again.

And, the Pit Miners would be in more danger from Kees, than from the disease Corandra and Zande had awakened.

## Chapter 29

Ellie shifted nervously under Corandra.

Rescue Henry, or rescue Rusty and Ambrena, if they were still alive. That was the choice.

Wenda had made her choice. She galloped around Corandra, and on down the trail to the river. The Pit Miners appeared through the tall Grass Sea, and followed behind her.

Ida arrived beside Corandra on Shan, a camel known for speed. She nodded and they chased after the strange tree people.

Tree people in tales could be mean, and swift to justice for any perceived wrong. Even more so than the Pit Miners. They could also be fun, friendly, and full of laughter and song. Almond was said to have many tree people among their distant ancestors.

They weren't known to live in the area, although a few hunters from Webbel and Shims had mentioned they might have seen one. Other people laughed, and said the summer heat had them confuse old stumps with living people.

If the tree people were on foot, they should quickly catch them.

Henry's horse prints merged with several others, at a pace that didn't slow down. No sign of camel or other horse footprints. Perhaps, they were afraid of camels, and that was why they hadn't bothered her, or Wenda.

Swiftly they followed the trail as it wove between rocks of a strange shape and color. They were a little longer than her hand, red, and in many broken pieces. Some stacked high, while others littered the ground. More trails joined the main trail. At each juncture, Ida slowed down to verify the direction the hoof prints continued. They didn't want to keep going south, if Henry had been forced another direction.

Dust clouds billowed in the direction the path followed. Thunder rumbled. As it grew louder, Corandra glanced at Ida. They would have to make a decision, and soon, if the path didn't diverge.

A herd of wild cattle emerged above the grass. They raced ahead of the cloud of dust, directly toward them.

Ida pulled on Ellie's harness. Off the path, and away from the stampede.

The herd thundered by, with no sign of what had spooked it. Lions and tigers were the most common cause of herd stampedes. Occasionally, other large cats, whose names had been long

forgotten by even the Lava villa members, stalked the herds.

Corandra waited on the dust to settle. They wouldn't find the trail until they could see. Crouching and choking, she urged Ellie forward.

Ida rode beside her as they walked down the stampede trail. All sign of horse prints had been overrun by the stampeding cows. No signs of the trail branched off in either direction. Grass waved in a slight breeze, not giving the secret of where Henry had been taken. Silence, other than their camel's footsteps. No small animals had returned from escaping the stampede. A few torn, bloody, and unrecognizable carcasses showed the damage scrambling hoofs could do to what may have been wolf pups caught in the rush.

Corandra turned away. Wolves were valued among the Pit Miners as the ancestors of dogs. They often joined the dogs when hunting the large herds, and received their fair share. Living on the outside, looking in, and wanting to belong, like her.

"No sign of the trail we were following," Ida said.

"We have to find them. If they took Henry, they might attack again, in larger numbers. We have to know how many they are, and where they are." Corandra searched the sides of the path, looking for signs of Henry and his horse. Her eyes returned to the bloody carcass in the middle of the stampeded trail. Fur was obvious. It wasn't Henry.

Ida stopped. "Corandra, no one from Shims has ever been this far. We have to go back."

"We can't! We have to know! What kind of a scout are you, anyway?" Ellie moved under her, pulling back toward the only place she knew.

Ida closed her eyes. "Good enough to know when I am in over my head. We can't go on alone. If we are captured, no one will ever find Henry or know the danger we are in. Wenda's group will have to help us find them."

Corandra glanced down the path. Finding where the horse had branched off would not be easy, either now, or later, if they hadn't already missed it. More people would be safer. "We'll never catch up."

Ida laughed. "We could if we were going to try. Let's go inform Quan. If he says to go on, and lead a small group that are left in Shims, we will. It's a plan at least. If Wenda's group isn't back by nightfall, Ellie and Shan can catch them. She'll stop. Walking people won't be able to follow the trail in the dark. They aren't trackers."

Corandra sighed and glanced down the trail again. No one, not even Webbel knew what kind of people, animals, or lands lay to the far south. Dangerous roamers came from that direction. Maybe Dan would know; if he were with Quan.

She turned Ellie and followed the cattle trail back toward Shims. Leaving Henry to fend for himself wasn't what Dover or Zella would want. Of course, they would rather the rest of the villas had a chance to protect themselves and survive, even if Henry did not come back.

Her eyes misted. She slid as Ellie shifted against Ida, and Shan. Corandra glanced to the side Ellie had shied from.

A large lion padded along beside them. His shaggy mane framed a panting mouth. Plodding feet kept pace with the camels, neither going ahead, nor struggling behind.

Corandra gripped her spear. A male lion could be chasing after lionesses who had stampeded the wild cows. They'd have to be careful.

The lion glanced up at her, slobber dripping from his jaws. He glanced back in front and kept pace until they reached the section where they had met the wild cows. He loped off east, a different direction than Wenda had gone.

Corandra drew in a deep breath.

Ida touched her shoulder. "Come on, let's follow this path to Shims, it's quicker." She led them down a narrow path through the Grass Sea.

No sign of the lion following them. Corandra had never felt so alone in the open. Even though the Grass Sea was almost as tall as she was, she felt as if every living thing could see her, and she could see nothing.

Ellie sensed her mood, and stayed behind Ida. Normally, they would slow to a walk, to enjoy the plant and animal life, and the quiet. Instead, they ran as fast as the two camels could go long term with their loads.

Dark approached as they reached Shims.

Children gathered around the fire with the adults who had remained.

Ida walked her camel through the crowd, straight to where Quan sat on log.

Quan looked up at them. His eyes darkened as he saw no one behind them. He looked down at the ground.

Ida slid off her camel. "Any word?"

He shook his head.

Corandra slid off Ellie and waited.

Quan looked up at her. "Tell me."

Corandra told him of the attack, the tree people taking Henry, the stampeding wild cows, and even the lion that strode beside them.

He looked up at them. "It is as we feared."

Ida squatted in front of him and took his hands. "We must ride tonight and find Wenda, and the others. Only with a group do we have any hope."

"Gather the scout trainees." He turned to the fire.

Ida went in search of the scouts.

Corandra slid to the ground beside Quan.

"Quan, did we do right? I wanted to follow and find Henry. Zella and Dover will never forgive me. Nor Rusty."

He closed his eyes before looking into the fire. "One can never guess the outcome that one does not try. Better for all of us to know."

Ida and Corandra explained to the young scouts, barely as old as she was, what they had seen, and heard, and the trail they had followed.

"Do you want us to find the trail in daylight?" One of the young women asked.

Ida glanced at her.

The whole group turned to Corandra. Quan may have been right. They couldn't follow a trail they hadn't seen in the dark any more than Wenda's group could. "I think you can wait until daylight. Stay together. Watch for trouble. There are so few adults here now, we need everyone to help." She hoped it was the right thing to say.

"Don't run off like I do. It won't help you, or the rest of the Pit Miners. We have to go now." Corandra hurried to Ellie. It would be a long night, and she and Ida had never been where they were going. Neither had their camels.

Ellie's stride rocked Corandra to sleep. Falling off and landing under her hooves wouldn't do anyone any good. Struggling to stay awake, she watched for signs she might have missed. They picked their way through the moonlight until they reached the river. The camels drank thirstily.

"I wish we dared rest," Ida said.

"It would be nice. Will Wenda have moved on before we reach her?"

"I don't know. The trail will be more difficult to follow now. Better

go down a bit, and cross the river."

"I thought you said you'd never been across?"

"As hunters and scouts, we have to know where it is safe to cross, especially if a large animal we are hunting crosses the river."

## Chapter 30

Rusty tried to focus on digging as the horses crowded closer.

If all Kees looked for were glass particles, she wasn't interested, and all the good artifacts were probably long gone. Ropes dangled on the nearby elephant lodge stones that had been moved yesterday.

"Marken, come here." Rusty sat back on her heels. The stones gleamed and glistened in the early morning dew.

Marken slid over beside her. "Can we use the ropes to tie up Vendon and Xile?"

He glanced at the ropes, back her, and smiled. "Good idea. What will we do with them then?"

Ambrena's face paled.

Brix watched them closely.

"I don't think we dare leave them here. They might escape. And I don't think we should kill them, we may need their help to know where Kees is."

"You have me." Marken walked over to the ropes and pulled a few away. "I think these are strong enough. They'll wake up soon. What's your plan?"

Rusty pushed her tools back in her gatherboard. "We set out to find Uden, Fendon, and Jorn. They may be able to help us."

Ambrena touched her arm. "I don't want to leave the mini-lodge and the artifacts. They may be our answer."

"And Jasey's camel should bring the Pit Miners here," Brix said.

"We don't know that he went back to Shims, or any of the villas. This job is ours, and we have to do it." Rusty picked up her gatherboard.

"Ambrena, I think it may be our answer. We need help to find the answers hidden in the squares, if you can understand that. Plus," her fingers touched her chest. "I need answers too, and so do you. And if Corandra's mother can be found, she needs her, as much as we do." Rusty walked to the entry without looking back.

Marken ran up behind her. "Are we taking them, or abandoning them?"

Rusty's eyes closed. She opened them and looked up at Marken. "We may need them. Tie them up and attach them to the elephants."

"We are taking the elephants?"

She nodded. "We are taking the elephants, and turning the

horses loose. Elephants can travel fast, and find water."

"You've never ridden one."

"I'll learn. And so will Brix, Jasey, and Ambrena. The horses will be set loose to return to Shells with a message." She grabbed a piece of rope and stalked off to the fire pit.

Xile and Vendon snored beside the glowing embers.

Rusty glanced at Marken. She pointed first to Xile, and then from Marken to Vendon.

Brix joined Marken and they stood over Vendon with the rope.

Jasey walked up beside Rusty.

She handed him a piece of rope and pointed at Xile's feet. Jasey bent over, almost touching his feet.

Rusty breathed deep. She drew the rope around Xile's right wrist. Tying a slipknot, she pulled it gently.

He groaned and rolled over.

She stepped over him, close to the fire.

Sliding her rope under his left wrist, she pulled it against the first slipknot.

His eyes opened.

The knots jerked tight.

Xile tried to scramble to his feet. He fell screaming on top of her.

Rusty's eyes closed as she kicked and fought to push him off. Her hands let loose of the rope.

Faster than she could realize what happened, he rolled over against the warm embers, and screamed again.

She found the rope and pulled it tight.

With Jasey and Ambrena's help, they pulled his body away from the fire.

He lay their writing in pain, no skin aflame. Scorched marks on his arms would sting. His hair had burnt, leaving an odor that she wouldn't soon forget.

Brix and Marken tied up Vendon without a fight.

"What are you going to do now?" Vendon said. "You don't stand a chance without us. All of Kees will die."

"No," Marken said. "Not everyone in Kees is bad. Perhaps our God and Goddess are angry with your behavior, and that is why they sent the giant wave to take your mother away from you."

Vendon laughed. "Then why did she take Yall from you?"

Marken's rage lifted his arm as if to strike Vendon. "She hid under your rule. Yall was your sister, and not strong enough to stand and say no to you."



He grabbed the rope on Vendon's feet. "Come on, we'll take him first."

Brix and Marken half dragged, and half carried, Vendon to the first elephant waiting at the lodge entry.

Rusty sat with hands on her knees, and took a deep breath.

Ambrena checked Xile's arms and legs. "Some burns. He'll live. Somehow I don't think Goddess Amber or Kafa would want us to worry about them."

"The smell of burnt flesh." Rusty poked a stick at the fire pit.

"It almost scared me away too. You okay?" Ambrena sat beside her.

"As soon as we are gone, we'll feel normal again." Rusty glanced at Xile. Better not speak of it where he could hear.

Ambrena nodded.

Jaasey stood over Xile with a stick in his hand.

Marken and Brix returned leading an elephant. It didn't take them long to load Xile the side opposite Vendon.

"Better make a grass mat to cover their faces," Marken said. "I'll be right back."

Rusty and Ambrena wove two quick mats while Marken lined up the elephants, and attached them together.

"I have to leave something so if Corandra comes, she will know we are okay," Rusty said.

"She'll come. What do you want to leave?" Ambrena tied the cover over Xile's face, and made sure he couldn't scream or yell through it.

Rusty glanced around the fire pit. Corandra couldn't read, and words might be washed away if it rained.

Marken held the horses beside him. "How about the gift you gave me?" he asked Ambrena.

She turned red.

He smiled and leaned closer. "I know what it means in your villa. And I know what you meant by giving it."

Ambrena turned away.

"Corandra would recognize it, if she finds the right horse. She might take it wrong though. She might think Ambrena was hurt and died."

Marken nodded. "It was a thought. I have an idea. You hold the horses Ambrena. Come with me Rusty."

On the other side of the fire pit he whispered, "She would know what the ancestral object looks like?"

Rusty nodded.

He grabbed a few short logs and stones and placed them carefully, to look similar to it, enlarged. "Will it do?"

"I hope so. Which way do we go?"

"You are leading this expedition, don't forget."

"Release the horses!"

They galloped off down the trail she hoped led back to Shims.

There was no other way now, than the elephants. She gulped. Elephants were tall and she had never ridden one before.

"Help us settle on the elephants."

Marken grinned. "Of course."

Before long, they were on the elephant's backs and ready to go. Marken rode next to Rusty, to help direct the group.

"Which way?"

Rusty peered out over the grass tops from her perch on the elephant's back. "Northeast. Dan thinks they stay near some mountains in that region. I've never seen a mountain, have you?"

Marken started the herd moving. "Only water mountains, and those will devour you."

Ambrena rode her elephant up beside Marken. "Tell us about them."

Marken launched into a tale about water mountains and how the boats they rode in would go under and over them. "Gentle hills of water are nice; as they help the boats move forward, and sometimes backwards. Once they rise to mountains, they can fill a boat with water, or dash it onto the shore in more pieces than you can count."

"Is that what happened to Kees?"

He nodded. "I guess I don't want to think about it anymore. Tell me more about Corandra."

Rusty and Ambrena shared stories with Marken. Corandra and all the fights she started were almost funny now. It was good to laugh again. Perhaps she and Glenna could find peace, even without Zande.

Brix and Jasey rode close behind, keeping an eye on Vendon and Xile tied to one elephant's back.

"Has anyone ever told you the name of the group your friends joined?" Marken said.

"No. I don't remember Uden well. She left as soon as Corandra and Henry could eat on their own. I don't think they remember her at all." If she had stayed around, perhaps Corandra would have someone else to dampen her temper. Or, make it worse.

Tall grass gave way to a sandy lakeshore with patches of brushy trees along the edges. Dark hazy patches rose in the far distance, across the lake. They might be mountains.

"A break would be good," Rusty said.

"Elephants can swim. I don't know how deep the water is though." Marken slipped to the ground while his elephant drank.

"Or, if there are any Kafa monsters here." Ambrena's elephant showered the air above them with water.

Rusty shivered. They had to cross, and nearby, if they could.

She walked down the shoreline, stopping well before a pile of brush. She glanced through the brush, and saw no signs of people. No need to fear everyone. The lake spread as far she could see in front and to the sides. Beyond the lake, dark patches touched the sky. If they were mountains, they didn't look like much from here. Pebbles moved under her feet. She touched one. It rolled into a footprint.

People had been here since the last rain. Who were they, and where were they?

Rusty followed the footprints closer to the brush pile. "Marken, Ambrena, someone's been here."

They walked up beside her.

"Is anyone here?" Marken said aloud.

No response.

"Let me follow the prints. Maybe I can find them." Rusty led the way around the brush pile. The prints appeared to be one person. They couldn't have been Corandra. She hadn't found this lake when she ran off, had she? No female villa member other than Corandra, and her mother, had ever been known to choose to travel alone.

# Chapter 31

Grass crunched under Ambrena's feet as she followed Rusty and Marken. Something about this place made her nervous. It didn't feel safe. She gripped her club. It wasn't wild animals she was afraid of. Wild people could be far more dangerous when cornered.

When they stepped around the brushy corner, she realized why. Even without the trees, this beach was almost identical to Kafa Sighting.

She wanted to close her eyes, and didn't dare. "Rusty, I don't like this place."

"Let's take the elephants. You all ride and watch the footprints." Rusty started back.

Ambrena glanced at the beach area again. Somehow, she felt as if someone, or something, was watching her. Her spine tingled.

"Uden, if you are here, please show yourself." She followed Rusty and Marken.

They walked the elephants past the beach opening.

"Any more footprints?" Ambrena asked.

Rusty studied the ground. "They look a few days old. Uden and Fendon usually arrive at Tuttle before Fall Trade. We may have missed them."

"She never comes alone," Ambrena said.

Rusty looked up at her on the elephant's back. "If Fendon died, she might."

Ambrena looked at the desolate shore. It didn't share its secrets. "Follow the tracks, I guess."

Rusty walked ahead, glancing from side to side, and moving grass stalks out of her way. She turned this way and that trying to follow the lone set of tracks. Another brush pile blocked her path. This one looked different.

"Uden, Fendon, Jorn. Are you here?" Rusty called as she pushed her way into the brush.

"I hope there's no spiders in there," Ambrena said.

"Bound to be some," Marken said.

Rusty stepped back out, carrying a piece of cloth. She handed it up to Ambrena. "Looks like Nala's special weave. See, the colors, and the grain match."

Ambrena took the piece of tattered cloth. It did look like Nala's. In fact, it looked like a piece of one the mats by the fire when they

visited before they went to Shims.

"There's more cloth in there, and a small gourd. Someone is here, somewhere near."

"Who knows you that might come this way?" Marken asked.

Ambrena slid down to join Rusty. "Quan, Brael, Nala, Dan, and maybe a few other people."

She followed Rusty's trail into the brush. There was a broken water gourd, and more of the cloth that Nala had made. If she had followed them, she could be in danger.

"What size are the footprints?" Ambrena asked as she pushed her way back out of the brush.

Rusty checked with her own foot. "Larger than mine."

"Brix, come check your foot."

His foot was longer than, and almost as wide as the footprints.

"Do you think it's Nala?" Rusty asked.

Brix shook his head. "No. Nala is about your size, not mine. Uden too."

"We better follow the footprints and lead the elephants," Marken said.

They checked the ropes holding Vendon and Xile to be sure they were well knotted. Jasey would watch them.

Ambrena didn't like leaving them like this, since she was a healer, and not a killer. Deep down, she knew those two men would kill her, and every one of the Pit Miners, if they had the chance. Satisfied they couldn't escape, and weren't in serious danger, she nodded to Jasey and rejoined Rusty, Marken, and Brix at the front of the elephant herd.

They followed the prints down the beach. They crossed, and crisscrossed, in many places. Branches and shrub brush had been pulled along the path.

A band of wild dogs ran across the path chasing a rabbit.

An opening in the brush lead again to the lake's beach.

Ambrena paused, almost afraid to look. Illness in one villa could bring fear in another. That fear could feed into a danger as great as the danger she barely remembered from early childhood. If Dan had run away, he must have had good reason. Someone may have threatened him more openly than in the past. Perhaps they should let him travel alone to wherever he was going, and continue their search without finding him.

"Rusty, I don't think we should find Dan. If he's scared." Ambrena shivered, and pulled a blanket close on her shoulders.

"Brix and Marken are here. He won't be afraid of us. In fact, Brix, Marken, you stay back here until we call." Rusty stepped beyond the brush.

Ambrena gulped and followed her. She mustn't show her fear. Dan shouldn't be afraid of them.

They stepped forward onto the sunny beach.

A pile of brush clumped together. A man's back was to them.

"Dan, is that you?" Rusty asked.

The man jumped and turned around. He sat back on his heels a sharp rock in his hand. "I tried to find you. We have to find Jorn, now. It's late already."

Ambrena relaxed. "You could have come with us."

"No. I had to stay. Where are Brix and Jasey?"

"Brix, Marken, come on," Rusty said.

Brix and Marken joined them on the beach.

The elephants thundered down to the water to wade.

Jasey slipped off and sat beside them as well.

The elephant with Vendon and Xile hanging on stayed close to shore, while the others waded further out, up to their bellies.

"It's great to see you Dan," Ambrena said.

He frowned at the sight of Vendon and Xile. "I can see you've had trouble. Where are your horses, and Jasey's camel?"

"Hopefully finding the people of Shims. We need their help as well." Rusty sat on the pile of brush.

Marken sat down. "Ambrena and Rusty told me you were once a roamer."

Dan shook his head. "Not exactly. I grew up without a mother in Webbel. Blake put me in charge of some of the roamers. I was about as old as Rusty, and scared."

Marken leaned forward. "We can use your help to decide what to do about Vendon and Xile. And the damage they've done."

Dan closed his eyes. "Passing judgment is something I want to avoid. I ran to find Rusty and Ambrena. The news isn't good."

Ambrena touched his hand. It was obvious he was hurting. "Bad news from Shells?"

An elephant trumpeted and sprayed cold water on the group.

They stood up and backed off from the lake.

Dan watched the elephant herd relax in the water. "No news from them. We had the news you were captured, and another group of roamers had been seen by scouts. I knew we needed Jorn then. We need all the people related to us we can find."

Marken groaned. "It must be Tree Burb." He hid his face in his hands.

"Vendon and Xile should never have raided them!" Marken's body shook. "What can I do to fix it?"

Ambrena touched his shoulder. "We need to know, are the rest of Kees like Vendon and Xile?"

Marken calmed down. "No. Most are nice. Like people anywhere. I think they do tend to jump a little faster than my burb. Our secret name for them was always Spider; because you never knew when they might jump at you."

Rusty and Brix chuckled.

"I want to know about Tree Burb," Dan said.

Marken told him everything he had told Ambrena and Rusty. "Tree Burb people are river hunters, more even than Kees. I rarely talked to them. So, I don't know them well. I hope they don't attack your villas thinking they are Kees."

Dan clenched his fists. "We have kept to ourselves too long. We need to reach out and know our neighbors so this harmful disease can't spread again."

He pointed to the pile of brush. "After Rusty and Ambrena left, I had Nala's daughter ask around. People will tell her anything. They think Jorn, Uden, and Fendon live in a villa called Leana across this lake. At least, I hope I found the right lake."

"You were going to cross on that?" Marken walked over to the pile of brush woven together. Glancing out as far as he could see, he looked back. "You wouldn't make it half way. The water would soak through."

Dan lowered his head. "I had to try something. We need them."

He lifted his eyes and looked at Marken. "And they may need us before this is over. I'm going, and you can't stop me." He stood up and grabbed more brush to weave into the pile.

Marken looked to Ambrena. "We will go. Not on that. The elephants can swim. We have to decide what to do with Vendon and Xile."

Dan glanced up at him. "We could put them on the raft, and if it falls apart, we won't have to worry about them anymore."

Ambrena gasped.

Dan's stormy face turned to her. "Let the Goddess's wills be done. We have to hurry."

Marken stopped him. "We will hurry. I have an idea though. The rest of you eat, while I fix up the brush for the trip. It should make it. I

know more about boats than you do. And we can ride the elephants."

"You need to eat too," Ambrena said.

"I will, as soon as we are on the elephants. I have to take care of you all far better than I did of Yall." He turned away from her.

Ambrena wished she could comfort Marken. It wasn't his fault.

They ate travel food as quickly and quietly as they could.

Marken tied the brush pile behind one elephant and laced two of the Kees' huntboards onto it.

"Brix, help me. We'll tie Vendon on his own huntboard and see how well he likes to ride on it."

Marken and Brix struggled with Vendon, as he kicked and tried to free himself from their grasp. A cloth in his mouth kept him from screaming and scaring the elephants. Xile didn't fight. His eyes glared as they laced him to his huntboard on the uneven pile of brush.

Marken, Dan, Brix, and Jasey pushed the strapped men into the water. The raft floated, and it bounced on the waves.

The elephants were wet and slippery, so reaching their backs was even more difficult than on dry land.

Ambrena lagged behind. She had always followed Rusty, as had many others. If Rusty made the wrong decision, would the Pit Miners hold it against Ambrena and Brix for following her? They could have turned back now, and fought if needed. Somehow, they had to find help.

Brix held out his hand to her.

If he were worried, he'd have let her know. Even Jasey seemed content. They could read the trails better than she could. Perhaps they knew something she didn't.

Across this lake, a villa waited. How they would react to a herd of elephants and people they didn't know, waited to be seen. Oh how she wished to be in Tanna's lodge, a little girl again, with no worries.



## Chapter 32

The river crossing gleamed. A short break was all Corandra and Ida had taken. They had to find Wenda and the rest of the Pit Miners before daybreak.

Ida stared at the crossing. "I've never been beyond the river. We will have to go slower to follow the trail. At least the moon is shining bright."

This trip had rattled Corandra. Ellie was starting to slow. She had never worked so hard in her short life. "I'll lead."

"Have you swum on Ellie before?"

Corandra nodded. She urged Ellie forward.

Ellie surged into the stream, swimming across the current.

Icy water splashed Corandra.

Clouds temporarily covered the moon.

Wenda would set up camp somewhere they could find. The trail should be nearby.

She walked Ellie up the bank of the river. They had drifted downstream as they swam across. Brush blocked the path in places. Pushing it aside, she urged Ellie on. One trail glistened in the moonlight.

Corandra paused to examine it. No, it was too thin, and glistened too well. That trail had to be an old animal trail, perhaps a wild horse herd visited here for water regularly.

Ellie walked further along the bank finding another trail leading in the correct direction. She sniffed, and turned to follow it.

Corandra let her go; this had to be the trail.

Ida rode beside her. "Normally, Wenda would leave a token. Tonight, I'm not so sure."

"We have to find her. We need all the help we have to rescue Henry. Zella will disown me if he doesn't return to Shells."

Ida laughed. "You told him to go back to Shells. Zella will know that."

"It'll be my fault. Like everything else." Corandra urged Ellie ahead of Ida, and raced through the moonlight.

Ellie fought to slow down, to avoid tripping over exposed roots.

Being torn between who to rescue first was something Corandra never planned on. If she had left Shells sooner, Rusty and Ambrena would never have left Shims, or even Shells. Henry would have been safe with his sister. Zande would still be alive, never having

found the red box.

Zella didn't want this to happen to another gen. It wouldn't have. No one else would make the mistakes she had made, they'd know better. She had to fix them, right what she broke, and then find her own world, far from Shells, and the Pit Miners. Her throat burned as she fought to hold back her feelings.

Focusing on the ride in front of her was what mattered. People always said she jumped into making mistakes without thinking. Wouldn't they laugh if they could see her now.

The night lagged into the early morning, and still no sign of Wenda, or the camp. Corandra dozed on Ellie's back. It wouldn't help anyone to fall off. "We have to talk to stay awake. If our scouts hear us, it'll be good."

"I'm tired too."

Ellie stopped in the trail.

Ida's camel almost ran over top of them.

A boulder sat in the middle of the trail, on top of recently trampled grass.

"There are her marks. We turn here. Follow me." Ida led the way through a tiny opening in the grass.

The trail was barely wide enough for the camels without breaking stalks of grass. It twisted and turned, leading further from the main path. If it were a wild animal trail, surely Ida would have backed out by now.

Through the grass, a glimmer flickered.

Corandra took a deep breath. They were about to find someone. Whether their friends, or the roamers, she didn't know.

Ida's camel stopped, blocking the path. She raised her hand and tilted her ear toward the clearing. "I think it is our camp. Follow quietly."

Stepping through the grass into camp was like stepping into a tale of the ancients. Corandra had never been on a hunter's multi-day trip, and even then, no more than five ever went together. This camp was most of the adults in five villas huddled together near a fire, with their horses and camels in a ring around them.

Ida peeked over the horses in front of her. "It's them. Let's find Wenda."

She jumped off her camel and tied her to the nearest horse.

Corandra stayed on Ellie, and followed Ida through the horse circle. Ellie would follow her if she tried to leave her behind.

Wenda sat next to the fire, in much the same way Quan had sat

last evening. Staring into the flickering flames, and not seeing those around her.

Corandra pulled her gatherboard to her chest as she slipped off Ellie.

Wenda looked up as they approached. "Henry?"

Ida shook her head and sat down. In a few words, their journey spilled out.

Wenda handed them food and water. "This does not sound good. Does Quan want us to return to protect the villas?"

"He did not say." Ida glanced long at Wenda then took a bite of nutria jerky.

Some thought or meaning had to pass in that look, though what it was, Corandra did not know. "If they go there, and only children and the oldest are there, will the tree people ignore them?"

Wenda took her hands. "We must hold a council at first light. That isn't far away. Rest now, I must think."

Ida stretched out on the ground. "I think Quan will send a runner to Shells at dawn."

Wenda's eyes closed. "I do not know what Goddess Amber would want us to do. Find our people. Or protect our villas."

"I wish I knew. Do you think Goddess Amber and Goddess Kafa wish to no longer be connected?" Corandra knew sleep would not come with the question on her mind.

"It is possible. We've had a double day. Nap now." Ida snuggled into her shawl.

Corandra's mind whirled like the dust storms. She must decide what would be best, so the villas could go on with life uninterrupted. Now, that was no longer possible. What had the ghost of her sponsor dredged in Shelpit? Whatever it was, it had continued to bring them sorrow.

A cold drop of rain splattered across her nose, waking her with a start.

Wenda sat by the fire. "Not a good day for travel. We may lose the trail. Everyone awake, wake your neighbor. Council now."

The people murmured as they struggled awake and into a sitting position. Most had never spent a night in the open, far from a villa, other than for Fall and Spring Trade. They grunted as they pulled food from gatherboards and turned to Wenda.

Wenda watched Corandra.

Corandra's face turned red as she waited with the crowd. "Are you going to start the meeting?"

Wenda's voice chilled. "This is your journey to rescue your friends and my son. You're supposed to be in charge. Since you returned after running off, I expected you to want to resume leadership."

The people behind her murmured. No one had ever spoken to her like that in front of a crowd. Even in private, Zella had reprimanded her more gently. Her ears burned as she stared open mouthed at Wenda. Water brimmed in her eyes, whether rain, or tears, she was unsure.

"They aren't my friends. I wish they were. I don't know why Jasey and Brix went with them."

Wenda leaned forward. "Jasey's camel, and the other three horses, are all here with us. Where are the riders; and what happened? Give it to the people to decide what to do."

"When did the horses come back?"

"At dusk. I didn't tell you when you arrived so you would sleep at least some. I fear they are no longer among the living." Wenda reached in her gatherboard and pulled out a scrap of cloth. Red tinged with green.

Corandra glanced up in horror. No young woman from Shells would give up first choice cloth lightly. "Rusty and Ambrena are in trouble. I have to go at once!"

"And forget your responsibilities as you did yesterday!" Wenda shoved the material back in her pack.

"My son is out there too. Lost somewhere. Who knows what they did to him. He will never be able to tell me." Wenda crooned.

Ida tried to comfort Wenda.

Jasey couldn't speak. His lack of words could mean that unspeakable things could be done to him, and they should try to rescue them now, and not later. If they could find them. "Ellie! We're leaving."

She grabbed her gatherboard and pushed her way through the crowd.

Wenda grabbed her arm. Water dripped down her face. "I am not letting you ignore your responsibilities. Tanna, Robin, Zella, and Dover have pandered to you far too long!" Her arm squeezed tight.

Corandra couldn't pull away.

"They must be afraid of you. No other reason they would allow you to continue with your behavior. No one else would consider behaving so badly." Wenda shoved her to the ground.

The crowd gasped.

"Don't spread the evil. We will find Jasey and Brix." Ida pulled Wenda back.

Ida turned to Corandra. "Please try."

Corandra's legs shook as she stood. "I think everyone needs to go back to Shells to protect our villas. If we have no lodges, or food for the winter, finding Rusty, Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey will do no good. I will go on alone."

Ida touched her arm gently. "Aren't we supposed to decide as a group?"

Corandra turned to the silent crowd. "Does anyone want to stay out here lost? We will not be able to find the trail easily. It will be far too muddy soon for a large group to pass. I am going on."

The group murmured. "If we return who will lead us?"

"Wenda will, as always," Corandra said. She is a far better leader than me.

"No. We would allow Ida to lead us," one person said, and many clapped.

Oh no, my behavior has now caused the Pit Miners to turn against their hunting leader. Corandra turned to face Wenda.

Ida let go of Wenda. "Wenda and I will go with Corandra. Brael and Lavina will return with the group to Shims. You are all needed there. Go now."

As the people gathered their supplies and followed Lavina's lead, Brael stayed behind. "Are you sure the three of you should go on alone?"

"I'm sorry for my outburst. I am worried about Jasey." Wenda nodded.

Brael touched her arm. "I know you are. That is why I think you should do what you do best. I also know it's next to impossible to sit and wait to see if he is safe."

Wenda looked up into Brael's eyes. "Do you think?"

Brael took her hand and helped her up. "I think you need tea. I also think, I am needed more with Corandra and Ida if they find Jasey, Brix, Ambrena, and Rusty."

Wenda glanced at Ida.

Ida nodded. "You will be needed to protect Shims. Put your anger to protection. We will be back as soon as we can. I'll keep up with Corandra."

Wenda picked up her gatherboard, slung it on her shoulder, and walked off.

As she left, the gentle rain became a downpour.

"We better be going before the trail washes away," Brael said.  
"Corandra, you okay?"

Corandra nodded. She picked up her sodden gatherboard and readied Ellie for the trip. The Goddess's were covering the tracks they had to follow. The rest of the group could go back, if they made it across the river before it flooded. She fought to hold back a sob. Once they started on the track, she could cry, and no one would know.

"Ellie, find the trail. We have to find Rusty and Ambrena."

## Chapter 33

Rusty's elephant rolled under her as it swam across the lake.

The breeze picked up. The opposite shore appeared to sway and ripple. Waves swelled under the massive elephants. Clouds gathered overhead, dimming the sun to a chilly day as winter approached.

If the illness hadn't happened, they would all be safe around a bonfire celebrating the Fall Trade. Trading stories, listening to music, eating good food, and preparing cloth in preparation for the cold ahead. She had many artifacts from Shelpit to share among the various villas. While Shells was isolated due to the illness, the other villas would have to go on with the Fall Trade without them soon, if she and Ambrena couldn't find help. Even now, they might be gathering, though where, she couldn't guess. Shells had a gathering ground large enough, no other villa did.

Water swashed and gurgled. Currents pulled at the elephants as they splashed toward land.

The pile of brush carrying Vendon and Xile tugged, and tried to break loose from the elephant Marken rode. "Marken, behind you!"

Brush shifted and tangled in an elephant's legs.

The elephant trumpeted and kicked to escape the entangling limbs.

Marken struggled to stay on its back. He jerked the cords loose. The brush drifted further away. "Stay with the elephants!" He jumped into the water and swam to the floating men on huntboards.

Rusty pulled her elephant back. It couldn't gain traction, or stop like on land. She slowly turned it around, splashed and splattered to the pile of brush covered with water.

Once her elephant was behind it, Marken climbed up behind her.

Rusty then urged the elephant to push the brush carrying Vendon and Xile in front of them.

Their struggles had pushed them further away from the rest of the group. Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey were less able to control their individual elephants, and certainly not the extra two. Marken's elephant had swum to join its friends.

They were almost across the lake now. Movement was visible on the shore. Though impossible to determine if was people or animals. If Uden, Fendon, and Jorn were here, they would be scared of people on elephants. They wouldn't recognize anyone in this group.

The people who may be their friends would run and hide, and might be difficult to find. Why hadn't they talked about, and planned for a possible separation before they left the other side?

Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey were in the distance. Even a hand wave wouldn't be visible from here.

At least Marken can help, Rusty thought. There was no way she and Marken alone could hang Vendon and Xile onto her lone elephant. And this elephant couldn't drag them far on land because the brush would fall apart. They'd be stuck at the water's edge until the rest of the group could catch up. If they could. Marken was more used to controlling the elephants. Brix and Jasey would try. Ambrena would have great difficulty, since she only rode gentle horses.

The elephant placed her legs on dry ground, and pulled the brush pile to shore.

Rusty and Marken slid off.

"What do we do now?" Rusty asked.

Marken glanced at the elephant, the men on huntboards, and back at Rusty. "You walk ahead and watch for people. I'll help the elephant pull them at the water's edge. If we stay a body length off shore, we shouldn't be pulled out into the current."

Rusty pulled her gatherboard close. Nearby was a stick that would be perfect to protect her in case of a snake, without appearing too threatening to anyone friendly. She walked along the beach toward her out of sight friends. Marken stayed behind, and in the water.

It might help if she spoke. Even if no one answered, people had to be watching and listening from the nearby brush. "Uden, Fendon, Jorn, we are trying to find you."

The brush fluttered. A bird jumped out and ran down the beach. One of those not quite chickens; and not good eating birds.

Once her heart calmed down, Rusty continued around the bend. Hopefully, they would meet Ambrena, Brix, and Jasey soon. They should have landed not too far away.

Indentions ahead of her turned into letters as she approached. She stopped. "Marken, wait."

"What is it?"

"Sand words. Let me think." Rusty traced each letter, and tried to remember all of Zella's teachings from so long ago. She had never been one to play the word games. That was Ambrena. The letters made no sense. Perhaps they spoke differently on this side of the



lake. "Way." That could mean to "go away," or "come this way."

"Uden, are you here? Corandra's mother, we need you. These people you joined, we need help."

The brush rustled and a woman stepped out.

Could this really be Uden? Rusty could barely remember her. Uden had been gone too long.

The woman pointed at the elephant.

"It will bring you no harm. We were separated from our three friends and the other elephants."

"Is Corandra with you?" The woman's hands shook as she held onto a brushy tree.

Rusty shook her head. "No. I am sure she wishes she was. Can we meet with you and your villa?"

"No. They are scared of the animals."

Rusty stepped closer. "You are Uden?"

She nodded. "I was once called that. I am Treny now."

The pile of brush the huntboards were on was separating, threatening to drop the tied bodies into the waves. "Rusty, I'm going on before Xile and Vendon fall into the water. Wouldn't want them to drown this close to shore." Marken urged the elephant on.

Treny stepped out onto the beach. "You have more with you?"

"Vendon and Xile are tied up. We almost lost them, which is why we were separated from Ambrena, Brix, Jasey, and the other elephants. Please help us Treny. If you help us, you may save Corandra." Rusty reached out to the woman who shivered at her words.

"I have a villa to protect myself. Though Leana calls itself a maze." Treny walked to the water's edge to see the pile of brush the men were on.

"Does Leana visit other people?" Rusty asked.

Marken led the elephant on down the beach.

"We have boats. Hunting on both land and water, we meet a few other villas. Some trade occurs."

Rusty put her hand on Treny's arm. "Vendon and Xile attacked us. They would have hurt us. Marken told us of another group that may attack our villas because of what Vendon and Xile did to their villa. Corandra needs you."

Treny covered her eyes. "She has Zella and Tanna for a mother."

"Corandra needs you. We all do," Rusty said. Ambrena would know how to convince her. One of her best skills.

A young girl, barely past toddlerhood, stepped out of the brush pile. "Momma?"

Rusty closed her eyes. Of course, Treny had another child, or maybe two.

"It'll be okay." Treny pulled the girl close.

She looked up at her mother. "You aren't going, are you?"

Treny sat on her heels and looked in the face of the girl. "Would you like to meet your older sister?"

The girl nodded and rubbed her eyes with her fists.

Treny closed her eyes and hugged the child tight. "Go and gather the maze of Leana to the boat beach."

The girl wiggled away, and wiped her eyes, before she ran back into the brush.

"I did what I thought was best. Now, we will meet your friends, and let my villa decide their choice." Treny walked on down the beach.

Rusty followed. "Do you remember me at all?"

Treny pushed aside some brush on the beach, and the bones of an animal. "You were so smart. Always doing something to help others. I knew you would be good for Corandra. Sadly, the gen four grandmother and Zella were right. The more Corandra grew, the less I could be around her. She seemed to always need so much. People looked at me with pity and fear."

"Are Fendon and Jorn here with you?"

Treny glanced out across the lake, and ahead to where the elephants waited on them. "They went on a short hunt trip. They'll be back soon."

"Tell me more about Leana." Rusty pushed branches out of the way as they crept across fallen logs.

"Not much different from Shells, other than the boats. And no bad memories," Treny said.

Better not to remind her of the past Rusty needed her to face. "Did your nutria eat your garden this summer?"

A fish nearby slapped the water.

"No, we had enough water from the lake to make it through the drought. I'll show you how sometime. I do miss Zella's nutria stew."

They hurried on in silence to the gathering crowd.

At the clearing Treny stopped beside some trees. "Go, tell your friends."

Rusty glanced at her lined face, and ran to Ambrena.

## Chapter 34

Ambrena tried to steer her elephant away from strange shapes in the water, toward where Marken and Rusty had landed.

The elephants made every effort to ignore her pleas, and those of Brix and Jasey. They scrambled up onto the lakeshore by the strange wood pieces nodding in the water. Wood pieces that parted to make more room for the water the elephants let loose as their legs and backs drained.

"What are they?" Ambrena asked.

Brix slid down and walked over to the objects. "Bits of trees. Far larger trees than I can see here. They remind me of a few boats I have seen."

Ambrena slid off and walked over to Brix. "Jasey, keep the elephants here."

The dark colored wood pieces floated and bounced in the current. They would be useful in Lake Kafa, if people weren't so afraid of the Kafa Goddess. Rusty would know how they were made. She couldn't be far away.

A few people crept through the brush pile and stared at them, and the elephants. One man held up a spear pointed toward the elephants.

Ambrena searched their faces for Jorn, Fendon, or Uden. She had the faces of Shells to guide her in her search. The faces here were slightly more summery in look, with a more weathered texture, and larger noses than was common among the Pit Miners. Since there had been no contact with this villa, would they understand her speech? Especially if this wasn't the villa Uden, Jorn, and Fendon had gone to.

No one looked like her, Zella, or even Corandra. She hadn't heard anyone speak. Her hands began to shake. More people filed through the brush pile onto the beach, blocking their escape.

A young girl stepped out and walked forward. "Please don't take Momma away."

Ambrena stepped toward her carefully, watching the crowd. She didn't want to scare anyone if they couldn't understand her. She sat beside the girl. "I don't want to take anyone away."

"Momma said you could take us to my sister I don't know. I was excited. Now, I'm scared."

Ambrena wanted to hug the child. Rusty must have found Uden.

It would be great for Corandra to have a sister to care for. Maybe it was what she needed.

An unclothed young boy toddled from one of the women.

"Brother can't go with me, can he? I don't want to leave Wit behind."

Wit teetered beside his sister and plopped on the ground. Water dribbled as he sat down.

Someday soon, she'd like to return if she could. This villa might accept her, or at least her skills.

Clouds thickened in the sky. It would not be a good night to return across the lake. She didn't know if the elephants could swim in the stronger currents of much needed rain.

"Ambrena." Marken appeared around the brush leading the elephant Rusty had been riding. "Rusty found your friend. She'll be here soon."

"Are we waiting to move Vendon and Xile?"

Marken strode up the beach to stand beside her. "I'd wait."

His presence made her knees feel weak. She picked up some sand and waited. No one in Shells had ever made her feel this way. Ambrena wanted to be afraid of it. Strange and giddy as the feeling was, it seemed to be a gift, as it also gave her peace, and steadied her reactions to those around her.

Before long, voices could be heard speaking as they approached. One she recognized as Rusty. They came around the bend and through the brush.

Rusty looked at the woman, and then ran straight to Ambrena.

"Oh Ambrena, we have to." She glanced at the children in front of Ambrena.

She stood straight. "Let's join Brix and Jasey. Come on Marken."

They stood out of hearing distance from the crowd. "Uden changed her name to Treny. Not sure about Fendon or Jorn. They are hunting and should return soon."

"Guess she couldn't live with the memories," Ambrena said. "A new villa, a new name. We'll have to tell Tanna and Zella."

"She wants to see Corandra. You have to break through her fear. Ambrena, you are the only one who can!"

Treny shuffled up to them. "I don't want to leave. I'll try to do what I can to convince others to help you though."

Her daughter ran up and grabbed the hem of her shirt. "Momma take me with you."

"I'm not going Shara." Treny sighed.

Shara stomped her foot. "You promised I could meet my missing sister!"

Treny tried to hug the child.

The child pulled away. "You are going, and you will take me this season! Don't leave me behind with the old adults and the babies!"

Another woman, who looked vaguely familiar, plodded up and tried to pull Shara from Treny. "Come now, you are always happy with me. Let your mother talk to her visitors."

Shara pulled away and grabbed Ambrena's hand. "You know, don't you? I have to go. My sister's in trouble, or you wouldn't be here with all those giant animals. I have to save my sister that I don't know. Momma kept her from me."

Treny covered her face and turned away.

Shara was right. It hurt Treny too much. Though the words from her daughter's lips, might be the balm to save them all, including Treny herself.

"Treny, please tell them what you know," Ambrena said.

She shook her head. "You." Treny sat on the beach. She turned her head from view and cried.

Ambrena had no idea where to begin. "Shara, will you sit with me while Rusty explains everything?"

Shara nodded.

The unnamed woman motioned to the people to come close.

Rusty stepped forward and quickly explained what had happened to them, and what Marken had said. "We have to decide what to do with Vendon and Xile. Kees and Tree Burb mustn't attack our villas. If they do, they may hurt you as well. Please help. You are connected to us, and we will help you. We barely have enough food for winter, and a sickness is in Shells."

The woman who had tried to take Shara moved forward while the crowd murmured. "You know Zella well?"

Rusty nodded. "She sent us for help for the sickness in Shells. Zande died in my arms."

Ambrena wanted to reach out to Rusty. If she did now, her friend might break into tears. Whether the tears would deepen the pain, or help it heal, she didn't know.

Shara toddled over to Rusty and grabbed her leg. "Who is Zande?"

Rusty wiped her eyes. "A child who wasn't my own, close to your age. I treated him as my own." Her voice broke.

The woman turned to the crowd. "My mother came here much as

Treny did. I never met my sister Zella. I feel the grief that Shara knows all too well. I do not wish her to live that way forever, never knowing her sister. We must help these villas. They are our family as well."

The woman turned to Ambrena. "I am Falena. My mother wanted to forget and tie herself to Leana, like Treny did. I've always felt as if half of my life were missing. Unknown, and possibly in danger."

"Jorn, Treny, and Fendon came. Didn't they tell you of Zella?" Ambrena asked.

"Yes. They told me. I think half the reason they went back each Fall and Spring Trade was to keep information flowing to me of my missing sister. She didn't know about me, and I never was sure about how she would react to finding out I exist." Falena traced a line in the sand with her toe. "Zella will want to know why I waited. I hope it hasn't been too long. I always thought, if she saw me, she'd know. I'd go near the villas and watch the people while Fendon and Treny spoke with someone they knew."

Shara reached for Falena's hand. "We can go? Now?"

Falena squeezed her hand. "At daybreak. It will be dark soon, and we have much to prepare. When the hunters return, we will prepare the meat, and decide who will stay and who will go. You must care for Wit while helping."

"Come on. I can go find my sister." Shara ran off into the brush.

Shara would be a handful, like her older sister. Ambrena smiled and stood up. "I am sorry we must impose on you, and the rest of Leana."

Falena held out her hands. "We have much to learn from each other."

Ambrena took her hand. The sky grew darker.

"Can we cross after the rain?"

Someone she didn't know spoke. "Sure. It won't be as easy. We can do it though."

"I saw letters in the sand. I didn't know what they meant," Rusty said.

"Leana's Goddess likes to have her name written in the sand by the water's edge. When it rains, we repair it, and add tree bark and roots. It brings the nutria out. They keep coming back on their own," Treny said.

"A good way to catch them," Ambrena said.

"The nets we use for fishing grab them. We can drop them on them from the trees, and choose which ones to keep for food and

furs. They may be wilder than Zella's, though they are fun to watch play in the water," Treny said.

## Chapter 35

Rain puddled around the fire. Much needed rain to end the growing season drought. Except it was too late. Growing season was long over. Now, it would create a cold, squishy mud for the Pit Miners to try to save their lodges in.

Corandra urged Ellie to follow the trail. Neither normally ventured out in the rain. She had no choice. There would be no nutria stew at the end of the ride to warm her up. She pulled her furs tighter around her shoulders.

Brael and Ida rode beside her.

The drizzle made the path of broken grass slippery. No sign of daylight, or a break in the clouds. Corandra covered her neck to keep it dry as Zella had taught her. No one spoke as they focused on searching for any clues that may have been left by Ambrena or Rusty.

Tanna's dogs could find Rusty and Ambrena anywhere. The dogs usually ran from her though, so she hadn't bothered to look for one to bring. Ida and Brael hadn't mentioned bringing one either. No one had expected rain after such a long drought.

Slipping and sliding through the wet grass exhausted Corandra. She closed her eyes and dozed from lack of sleep.

Ellie stopped before a large fire pit.

Corandra slid off and walked to the sodden ashes. A line of stones tripped her. She dusted herself off and walked around the pit, looking for anything that belonged to Rusty or Ambrena. If they had been here, they were nowhere in sight now. There was no visible lodge for humans, though an ultra large herd lodge loomed in the dreary distance.

She covered her head as the rain pounded heavier. A path led to the herd lodge. If they had been here, she would find them. Somehow.

Ida and Brael searched the surrounding area as well.

"There's a mining pit over here, looks ankle deep in water," Brael said. "No one in it though. I think they've been here. The order in which the pit has been recently dug is as precise as Rusty would leave it."

"The herd lodge shows signs of stones being moved recently. As well as digging between the rings. See anything helpful Corandra?" Ida said.



"There is a path, much more narrow over in that direction, leading further away," Corandra pointed. If they travelled further from Shims, it would be more difficult to find the missing people, and they might run out of food themselves.

"I think the storm will lighten up soon. Let's go over to the brush, rest, and eat before we go on," Brael said.

"I wish I knew why they went on." Corandra walked on into the brush beyond Ida and Brael. There was a tiny, new path, little more than an animal trail. She took her food and followed it.

"Don't be long!" Ida said.

"I'll watch for snakes." The trail led to a tiny clearing with a small, tall, stone lodge in the center.

Corandra gasped. "Rusty, Ambrena, are you here?" She stepped into the clearing, and ran for the open entry. Inside, it was almost too dark to see. No people; alive, or otherwise. Several boxes on a table with something shiny beside them. There were footprints in the dirt. She turned to step back outside.

The order of the boxes was familiar, like something she had seen somewhere before. She shook her head. That made no sense, unless it was something Zella had shown her.

After a quick meal, and no sign of Rusty, Ambrena, Jasey, or Brix anywhere, they followed the smaller path away from the campsite.

"I'm glad you sent Wenda back," Ida said. "Seeing this place, and still no sign of her son, would have been too much for her."

"I hope we find them soon." Corandra covered her eyes, and peered ahead.

Clouds still sprinkled as they followed the trail that led further from Shims.

"I hope so too. What you found may make a difference. I didn't see any signs of a fight, though I did see scuffle marks near the fire. If it hadn't rained so much I might have been able to read what had happened." Ida's horse slid on the muddy trail. She pulled her horse off to the side, to check her feet.

Corandra followed the trail silently. It looked as if the elephants had traveled one behind the other. Rain slowly cleared away and wisps of sunlight slipped through to the ground. A lake, dark as the night sky shifted into view beside them.

Elephant tracks led in and out of brush piles. At one place, there were signs that people had stayed still for a while. The animals had gone into the water, and not come out nearby. Something had also

been pushed into the water. The choppy waves had washed too much sand and mud away, to make out what it could have been. Rusty and Ambrena wouldn't willingly cross a lake. That was something she would do, no one else would consider it.

"We'll look on down," Ida said.

"I think they went across the water. Something was dragged out into the lake. I have to find them." Corandra pushed Ellie into the water to check up and down the beach.

Beyond the brush pile, footprints led north.

She followed, and yelled for Ida and Brael. "Someone walked this way, let's go!" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew better. Those were single footprints, and not from a group of four or more. Anyone could have made them.

The prints showed slowing footsteps, with an occasional round indentation beside them. The indentation seemed strange. Ahead, driftwood slapped the sandy beach. It wasn't floating away on the heavy waves from the lake. There was a lot of driftwood, almost enough to build a lodge.

Corandra turned up onto shore to avoid the driftwood. Many footprints were all over the sandy beach here, as well as elephant prints. Questions raced through her mind, so many, she couldn't put them into words.

"Stop," A voice said.

Ellie froze.

Corandra nearly tumbled off when she saw a man and two young adults sitting next to the bobbing driftwood. "Who are you?"

The old man grinned up at her, "Not afraid huh? Tell me who you are."

The heat rose in her cheeks. Everyone knew who she was. "If you don't know who I am, I'll."

"That's enough!" Ida rode around the brush pile.

She rode up to the man and glared at him. "Do we know you?"

He glanced down at the crossed hands in his lap. "Once you did. Once I led many villas. Now, I lead no one."

"You live alone?"

"No," he shook his head. "I simply gave up leading others. These young men are in charge of our boats, and I merely follow along now."

"You must be Jorn. Where are Uden and Fendon?"

"Uden changed her name to Treny. This must be her wild, untamable, older daughter."

Corandra gulped and nodded. "Where is my mother? Has she been captured too?"

"No. We are here to guard the boats. Treny went with Rusty and Ambrena to take medical help, and hunters as well, to Shims and Shells. Seems they need more neighbors."

"Then, I must find my mother." Corandra turned Ellie away from the man. "Which way did she go?"

Jorn stood up and stopped Ellie from moving. "Henry isn't with you."

Corandra gulped. "He was attacked and taken by the Tree People. Wenda went back for him."

"Wouldn't you rather save him?"

"All of the danger that our villas are in, is my fault. I have to fix it. Meeting my mother will help." She tried to encourage Ellie to go around Jorn.

Jorn stopped her again. "She's almost ready. Not quite. Rusty and Ambrena said some things, and I wasn't able to think about all of them before they left this morning. I will take you to Mills for help. We will need them too."

Corandra glanced out at the placid lake. Would the Kafa Goddess hear her if she asked for help? "Henry wanted to go to them. How can they help?"

"In many ways. We will walk. Near evening we will reach them." Jorn picked up a huntboard and stalked to the northeast.

If Jorn were correct, and Mills could help them, they should look for all the help they could find. He had said her mother wasn't ready to see her. Corandra would have to prove she could be responsible by not running away. Finding out the truth about Henry, Rusty, and her own sponsor would surely go a long way in making the people in Shells accept her, or send her away permanently.

"Point the way, and I'll ride ahead to watch for trouble." If Jorn saw her as successful, he would know she could be a leader.

"No," Jorn said. "We are four, we will stay together."

Corandra grumbled. "What do they have that will help us, besides knowing where Rusty and Henry's sponsor came from?"

Jorn looked up at her. "I could say you'll see. Let me think of how to describe what I know."

They walked on in silence. Birds flapped overhead. Bugs chirped in the tall grass. Wolves and wild dogs howled far away.

Corandra shivered. Mills might be deserted. Perhaps it had been attacked and the wolves were dismantling the dead. For Henry and

Rusty, she had to find out the truth. Somehow, she had to stop the evil happening to the Pit Miners.

## Chapter 36

"I'll wait here, with Vendon and Xile," Brix said.

Jasey nodded.

No point in taking them to the villa tonight to return to the lake in the morning. Rusty didn't mind. She'd rather not see the two men tied to the huntboards.

The elephants tramped behind the people as they walked to Leana. The narrow path from the beach widened as their bodies pushed through. Bushes snapped, and dogs barked and snapped at their massive feet.

Rusty walked beside Dan, who guided the great beasts.

In the villa of Leana, people gathered around the central fire area. It wasn't so different from Shells. Marken and Ambrena urged the elephants to an open area beyond the villa. Most of the people were quiet. Dogs ran, tails between their legs as the giant beasts lumbered between the lodges.

After a meal, the people of Leana took the four strangers to an empty lodge to share for the night. Fendon and Jorn had not returned from hunting. They would not leave in the morning, unless they did return. Rain pattered on the outside of the lodge towards early morning. A thin daylight crept across the landscape. A drizzling rain continued.

At the morning meal, Fendon, Jorn, and another man arrived with zebra meat to string up and dry at the fire pit.

"The elephants surprised us," Jorn said. "We've not captured any animals here. Cows that have been in Leana's herds as far back as they remember, are all we have." He chewed a piece of steak.

Rusty laughed. "Not sure we'll keep them either. They are helpful for now. I'm the dig leader for the Pit Miners."

He nodded. "I know. Zella must be proud of you."

Rusty glanced down at her twisting hands. "If she were, I don't think she'd send me away. Of course, Shelpit is almost empty, and we may have to move. Sickness took little Zande. I miss him so. We are all afraid to dig anymore in Shelpit." She stared into the fire. Maybe that was why Zella sent her away. To find a new location for Shells.

Jorn sat the empty water gourd on the ground. "We don't dig here. We trade with a couple of villas further out, and most of them don't mine anymore either."

Rusty stirred the fire beyond her feet. "Do you think all the pit mines our ancestors left are empty?"

He leaned back and looked at the roof. "Yes and no. There are definitely some, somewhere untouched. However, we may never find them. So many people were killed in the ancient tales; there have to be places people have not returned. Or were killed by buried illnesses like Corandra found."

"I don't blame her. It isn't her fault Zande died. He took the glass out of the box and broke it in his hands. I thought he knew better. I thought he would do good to watch Corandra for us."

Jorn glanced at her. "How old was he?"

Rusty smiled. "A few trade seasons old. I guess Glenna and I spoiled him a bit. I went back to Zella's after he died. I couldn't bear her tears." Her eyes watered at the memory of Glenna holding Zande's body. The private talks they had together before the death ceremonies began. Had she run away from Glenna, even when she thought Glenna pulled away from her? Perhaps there could have been something different she could have done. If she hadn't blamed herself so much, perhaps Glenna might not have blamed her.

Jorn packed his cup in his gatherboard. "Even with the rain, I think everyone will go today."

Rusty glanced up from her memories. "Marken said the boats, are not like the ones he knows."

Jorn nodded. "A child can manage one of these. Shara will begin training next fishing season."

Shouting and laughing outside brought them to the entry.

"We leave as soon as everyone is ready," Falena said.

The trip back across the lake was far wetter than the day before. Rain splattered from the sky, joining the elephant's splashes as they crossed. Once on the other side, Jorn and two young boys stayed with the boats.

"Don't you want to see Zella and Dover again?" Rusty asked.

"Someone needs to stay with the boats. Dan said part of your villas might be looking for you. I'll be here to tell them where you are." Jorn sat on the sandy shore and refused to move.

Rusty glanced from him to the group walking in the direction of Tuttle. "You'll be okay?"

He laughed. "The lake is full of fish. We'll be fine. There is a tiny lodge nearby, we hunters use. Go on! I thought you were the leader now."

She laughed. "I'm the dig leader. Not the travel leader. I think

Treny is leading. She knows the way better than we do."

"Well, go on!"

Rusty hurried to catch up with the front of the line. She almost wished they hadn't let their horses go. The elephants travelled behind the main line of people carrying food and shelter for the group. One elephant carried Vendon and Xile, still breathing, and angrier than ever. At least their loud mouths were covered. Quan would call a council to determine their fate.

She shuddered at the site of their glaring eyes under the dripping grass mats.

At the front of the line Treny led, with Shara, Wit, and Falena.

Rusty tagged along behind them, glad to walk without worrying about being lost.

At midday, they pulled the group of people close together, and kept the elephants in a circle around them. The group rested while they ate and talked. Children napped in the shade of the elephants.

Rusty didn't realize she was dozing, until she heard the screams.

She scrambled up from the circle and searched for the source of the sound. A loud roar sent her backwards into the arms of someone behind her. She didn't know, or care, who.

Most of the people, and all except one elephant, ran from the sight of two lions attacking the elephant with Vendon and Xile hanging from its sides.

Rusty had a walking stick and her gatherboard. Being eaten alive was not her idea of the way either Goddess Amber, or Kafa, would want even those two men to die.

Dan and Marken ran past her with sharp sticks and hit the rope, making it fall off the elephant.

The elephant ran to join its friends.

Dan and Marken ran back to her.

She waited long enough to see one lion roar and place his face over Vendon's.

A loud crack ended his shrill cries.

Dan grabbed one arm, and Marken grabbed the other. They ran to join the rest of the group.

Not far away, the people had stopped and adjusted their gatherboards. They had lost nothing, other than the elephant's burden, in their mad dash across the Grass Sea.

"Are we still going the right way," Rusty asked Treny when she caught her breath.

Treny nodded. "There is a small lake over that way we

sometimes hunt nearby. We can turn south and be back on the Tuttle path in a brisk walk."

Rusty glanced back down the trampled grass. The lions hadn't roared since they ran. Perhaps they would be content with two men to eat. She shuddered. "They shouldn't follow, I don't think."

Brix looked back along the trail. "Not likely. If everyone is breathing okay again, you better be going on. It's a long walk. Jasey and I'll stay behind with one or two men from Leana to be sure we are safe, and that Vendon and Xile don't escape."

"I wish you didn't have to risk your life," Rusty said.

He touched her shoulder and looked her in the eye. "I'd rather do so here, in my comfort zone. Take safety and health back to our lodges. We will catch up soon." Brix strode off with Jasey and two men, striding tall beside him.

Rusty's eyes misted over. They knew wild animals, and should be safe, and all four could move faster following their trail, than the children trotting on the long walk could. She would be as brave as them. Pulling her gatherboard tight on her shoulder, she turned to Trency. "Let's go."

Trency lifted her gatherboard back to her shoulder, and pulled Wit and Shara close to her. "We should reach Tuttle by nightfall."

"I can't imagine being like Corandra. She took off alone with her camel Ellie for several days while the children of Shells were sick." Rusty gripped the strap on her gatherboard until her knuckles turned white, and followed.

Trency's eyes closed. "Did she say why?"

Rusty shook her head. "We were leaving when she returned. Henry saw her, I don't think anyone else did. I hope she isn't alone out here somewhere."

"Hunters often go out alone," Dan said. "Maybe she should join the Shims hunters."

Rusty's face turned red. "She doesn't want to be a healer, a weaver, or a miner. Perhaps that is what she is meant to do."

He looked at her. "There are other positions no one has held for a gen or two. Perhaps she belongs in one of them."

Rusty's heart sunk. No one wanted to think of the forgotten skills in the villa. People who watched others, reported crimes, real or false; or those who watched for roamers from places known, or unknown. Those purposes were almost as scary as the roamers themselves. Or those lions devouring Vendon and Xile.

Shara tapped Rusty's hand.



Rusty stopped to look at the young girl.

"Will you tell me stories of my sister?"

What good stories could she tell? There had to be at least one good story. The girl would hear enough bad stories soon. Rusty took Shara's hand. "Corandra and Henry, my brother, were raised as twins. I remember those days. Everyone was so happy."

Shara's eyes gazed into her own with rapt attention.

I'll have to be careful to not tell her the scary stories, or all the arguments Corandra seemed to search for, and find easily. The story of Corandra and Henry and the talking plastic should be a safe one. When she finished, she swung arms with Shara. "Tell me a story about you, and your brother Wit."

Shara skipped along swinging Rusty's hand and told story after story. She wasn't at all like her sister. Their mother had always been a part of her life though. Perhaps if she hadn't left Corandra behind.

Treny glanced back at her daughter holding Rusty's hand. A shadow crossed her face. She beckoned, then turned back to lead the group.

"Treny, do you want Shara with you?" Rusty asked.

Shara swung her arm, a little more than necessary.

Treny stared ahead. "She's safer with you. I'll scare the snakes away." She swung her walking stick with far more vigor than necessary with the noisy crowd following them.

Rusty closed her eyes. Nothing she could do for Shara would be right in Treny's eyes. Right now, though, Shara wanted to know more about the older sister she had never met. Stories would be good for Treny to hear too.

## Chapter 37

Leana's dogs loped ahead of Ambrena and Marken as they walked near the back of the line. She had seen to a few cuts and scrapes from those hurt when the lions attacked Vendon and Xile. Luckily, the elephants hadn't truly stampeded. No one had been seriously physically injured, other than the two men from Kees, of course.

The emotional trauma would have to be accessed later. Some would have nightmares, either of the death screams of Vendon and Xile, or the elephants running them down. She knew what her nightmares would be tonight, if she dared sleep at all.

People ahead of them walked at a speed which would allow the slowest to keep pace without worrying about anyone becoming lost. Elephants ranged behind, stopping to snack whenever they approached the people. They never strayed far, and trumpeted to scare away wild animals. Now, they were like watchdogs, protecting their acquired herd.

Marken walked beside her and listened to the stories as they floated back from the people in front of them.

Talking would speed the walk, and hide her fears. "What are you thinking?" Ambrena asked.

"Even with all these people I feel alone. Rusty ran to the front with Treny, as she should. Brix and Jasey are behind us somewhere. I feel I should have stayed with them." He grinned and waved his arm at the expanse of grass.

"They'll be fine. They've hunted lions." She didn't want to tell him they ate lion meat occasionally. He'd learn their customs, if Zella allowed him to stay.

"I'm selfish. I can't bear to see Vendon's face again." He stopped and turned to her.

Ambrena touched his hand. "His attitude? Or, because his face resembles Yall?" Marken would heal from his emotional pain, even if it took many seasons. Zella and Dover and could do it. If they had survived the illness.

"I don't know." He looked down at his trembling hands.

"Probably both. Don't feel bad. Zella will know where you belong." Ambrena grabbed one trembling hand and pulled him forward. "We have to catch up!"

He laughed and pulled away. They raced to catch the trailing

walkers.

Falena walked nearby, like Ambrena, to be sure no one was too exhausted to continue the walk. As children tired, adults tried to carry them. They were too weary, and carried too heavy of gatherboards to carry children too.

Dusk crept across the land. The first signs of Tuttle appeared beyond the leaders. Smoke should have circled above the villa for evening meal fires. Dogs should have barked in greeting.

She raced forward with Marken at her side.

Other than chickens fluttering out of the way, Tuttle was empty.

Ambrena gasped and covered her mouth. They should be here, unless they had died, or gone to Shells for the Fall Trade.

Dan ran by her, and into the Nala's lodge. He came out again and grinned. "I think they went on to Shims. Everything is packed and gone. We can all stay here tonight. It's too late to travel any further."

Several children nodded against their mother's legs, and held on so they wouldn't fall down.

Dan hurried to build up a fire inside the villa treasury. They would huddle close together in these strange surroundings.

Ambrena had visited Tuttle. She felt as if she were like the people with her, on the outside, looking in. Many of Tuttle's secrets she didn't know. Dan knew most of them. Many, even he had been excluded from, because of his past.

"Dan where is?" was heard from several people as he built the fire. He found some food to add to what the Leana group had brought, pointed out the creek for water, meal utensils, and other necessities as the people helped prepare a camp inside the treasury.

A smile slipped through as the crowd bustled around inside. Not at all like the sickly, hushed silence, except for coughs, of the Shells' treasury only a little while before. As tired as the people were, they shared the tasks, and comforted the lame that didn't stay behind as comfortable as they could inside the walls, safe from lions.

Cleanup of the evening meal began. Children and dogs snoozed out of the way. Brix, Jasey, and the other two men from Leana walked quietly into the treasury. A nod at the leaders was the closest to a comment on what had happened that afternoon. Jasey dropped two skinned rabbits by the fire for someone to rinse and place in a pan to simmer until morning.

No tales around the fire. All the old tales had been repeated on

the walk, and new ones would be found in the coming days. Adults settled down to sleep, less easily than the children. They faced their fear of the unknown, in relative safety.

Ambrena, Rusty, and Falena walked outside with Dan for first watch.

"We've never kept watch before," Dan said. "It's strange."

"We'd probably be all right," Falena said. "If we had arrived sooner, we could have looked around so we'd know where lodges are, and how the land flows."

Dan sat in the moonlight, waiting. "I think they went on to Shims. It won't take us long to reach it tomorrow. It'll be good to see everyone again."

"I could ride one of the elephants," Rusty said. "Go on ahead, so they'll be waiting for us."

"I want to see my sister," Falena said. "She may need my help if Shells is as sick as you said."

"As long as we've been gone, is anyone still alive there? I hope the illness didn't spread," Ambrena said.

Dan leaned back against the lodge. "I don't like the idea of splitting up."

"Rusty, I think you may be right. Take your pack, and go try to meet Quan. If no one is there, can you stay awake long enough to come back?" Ambrena asked.

Rusty nodded. "I'll be fine. Question is, can I separate one elephant without disturbing the rest of the herd."

"You aren't walking alone at night," Dan said sharply.

"I'll go and see if any horses or camels were left. I doubt it though." Rusty stood up.

"I don't think she should go alone." Dan watched her go.

"I'll wake Brix and Jasey. They may go with her, the sooner the better to find Quan awake." Ambrena slipped inside the treasury.

Brix and Jasey slept near the entry, so Dan could wake them part of the way through the night.

She shook Brix's shoulder. "We need you," she whispered.

He rolled over and tapped Jasey.

They followed her outside.

Rusty returned. "No horses or camels in sight."

"Why do you need one tonight?" Brix asked.

"So Quan will know we are safe, and are coming in the morning." Rusty sat down beside them.

Jasey smiled and waved his arms.

"Take Jasey with you. He can call his camel. All the animals near here know him."

Rusty went into the treasury for her gatherboard. When she came back she said, "How many are coming to Shims tomorrow?"

Ambrena glanced to Falena, and back at Rusty. "I don't really want us going separate ways, now, or ever. I understand though. If Falena is okay with it, I think most of Leana should go on to Shims. She and I can go to Shells."

Falena nodded. "I'm not Leana's leader, so I can't make that decision for the people. I think you are right. Most of Leana will go to Shims. Treny, Shara, and Wit should come with us."

Rusty nodded and left with Jasey.

Ambrena closed her eyes. One more sister friend gone from her side. The thought of feeling abandoned with so many people nearby brought a smile to her lips. She wasn't really alone. Rusty would be back. Corandra, they would see in the morning at Shells, if she hadn't run off again.

Deep inside, her heart trembled. If she returned to Shells without Rusty, and a cure for the illness, would Zella and Tanna turn away from her? A sob travelled upward trying to fight its way out.

A hand on her shoulder turned her gaze outward, rather than inward.

Marken sat beside her, gazing deep into her eyes.

Of course, he was in even more trouble than she was. Marken could not go back to his villa, had lost the woman who asked for him, and would not be able to return to that villa either.

He reached for her hand.

"Rusty is the closest to a sister I have, I don't want her to leave."

"Would you normally fear her traveling to another villa?"

Ambrena tried to laugh. It came out like a wild animal call. "No. She wouldn't. Rusty hardly ever travelled. I was always the one who did."

Marken touched her hand gently.

A tingle went up her spine.

"I'm going to stay with you. I know you and Rusty well. I want to meet Zella whom you have spoken with such regard for. When you show her the artifact, and tell her what you found, I am sure she will know what it is."

His words cheered her up.

"Come on, you need your sleep. Even if we leave after the rest of the group." Marken led her back inside the treasury to her

gatherboard.

She tried to relax and doze off. Marken had stayed nearby, as uncomfortable around all the strangers as she was. Knowing he was there, wouldn't replace Rusty, even if it was comforting.

## Chapter 38

Grass waved in the slight breeze.

Corandra gazed around her. Everywhere she looked, different plants grew, ones she didn't recognize. Off in the distance were strange tall trees, with arms that waved in a circle in the breeze. Not at all like anything she had seen before.

Jorn walked beside her. "You see them, don't you?"

"What are they?"

"Lost in the ages of the ancestors, they had a longer name. Now, they are called mills." He stopped to catch his breath.

"You could have rode Ellie. Were the strange trees named after the villa?" Corandra said.

Jorn laughed. "Never been on the back of a living animal, and I have no intention of doing so now. As for Mills, I think the villa was named after the artifacts."

Corandra shaded her eyes from the glaring sun to peer at the non-trees. They soared over the varying types of grasses, different from any of the Grass Sea she knew. Their arms waved in a circle, as if honoring a grass Goddess. "What purpose do they serve?"

More laughter as Jorn walked forward. "You have been in Shells too long. Sometimes, it's nice to have pretty things that are nice to look at. I don't know the truth of how they work, or what they do. I do know; they won't share the secret with anyone."

Ellie nickered.

"It's a remainder gift of the ancients?" Corandra sneezed.

"I think so. We should meet Gerry soon. He usually watches this field."

Corandra pushed Ellie on ahead. Now that she knew where to go, there was no stopping her.

"Don't race ahead!" Jorn shouted.

She raced on anyway. The old man should have ridden with one of them, and they would have reached Mills, and maybe back to Shims by now. They had to find Henry, Rusty, and Ambrena. The key to what caused their sponsor's gen's violence should stop what was happening now. One way to find out.

Even though Ellie raced as fast as Corandra would let her go, it seemed the strange trees stayed the same distance away. Almost out of breath herself, she reached the ground beneath one.

Like the villa of Shims, the wooden tree stood on a platform of

rock and wood. As big around as a lodge, with a covered walkway winding up the side. It narrowed near the top. The wooden arms arched in a circle on the slightest breeze. Ropes dangled from the tall wooden sides. A horse lodge nearby was empty.

Corandra gulped. Something about it made her stomach feel strange. A deep, empty, fluttery strange. She slid off of Ellie and walked to the giant lodge on a pedestal. Its arms flailed toward her. She ran to the walkway and followed the lodge up its side.

Climbing into a lodge way above the ground didn't appeal to her sense of normalcy. Even though there was a wall beside her, she felt as if she could fall and land on the ground. Higher and higher, she climbed until she reached an entry covered by wood.

She tried to put her hand between the wall and wood on the right side. It wouldn't budge. She tried the left. No movement. Frustrated, she pushed in front of her with both hands flat on the wooden panels. The wood flew away, and banged against the wall on her left.

Sunlight flooded in and struck a head in a hole on a dirt floor at her feet. The head turned her way. Familiar features beamed her direction. She had known them as long as she could remember.

Gasping, she clutched her chest. "Henry?"

A man lifted up out of the hole. The sun showed his face and shoulders a little more clearly. "Na. Who you?"

Corandra stepped back. Memories flooded through her. Henry had always protected her. He wasn't here now, and this person spoke different. As if he didn't know her words. She could run back to Jorn. He'd laugh. The rickety walkway wouldn't be easy to run down anyway. Better to keep this man in her sight. She'd run away too often. Proof that she could complete what she started would win her a place in Shells.

"Who are you?" Corandra asked. She stood tall and let the sun stretch her elongated shadow across the man before her.

He stretched back and laughed. "My place. Who you?"

Of course, he was right. Jorn would be here soon and fix it all, if she didn't now. "Jorn said Gerry would be nearby, is that you?"

He nodded and laughed. "Tell me."

"About me?"

Gerry pointed from her to the floor. At least speaking was easy. Jorn would find her and then she could ask the questions she should have already asked him. Her story's starting spot could be anywhere. What would Gerry need to know?



She glanced at his eyes. So like the eyes of Henry, she almost forgot this was a man, not the boy she grew up with. "Henry and I grew up together. We never knew our past. We want to know now where our sponsors came from. Can you tell me about your villa?"

"Corandra, where are you?" Ida called from down below.

She stood up, walked out the entry, and glanced down at the ground. It was so far away. Higher than any tree she had ever climbed. Her head swirled, and she sank down on her knees.

Rough arms held her away from the walkway so she wouldn't fall.

"Thanks," she whispered.

Brael was soon beside her. "I know it won't do any good to remind you not to run off on your own. We'll have you on the ground soon."

"I'll carry." Gerry picked her up in his arms, carried her down the walkway, and placed her gently on the ground in the shade.

She opened her eyes.

He stared at her.

"Never been that high before."

"No trees tall here."

Jorn strode up and stopped at the sight of her and Gerry.

"Figured as much. Gerry, I need to talk to you alone."

Gerry walked into the tall grass with Jorn.

"He's really angry, isn't he?" Corandra touched her forehead. It felt warm, or maybe it was the heat from the sun.

Ida closed her eyes. "I think he knew what you would do. Responsibility doesn't come easy for you."

"I'm being responsible! I have to find the answers to fix whatever is wrong in our community!" She wanted to stomp her feet, and couldn't while on the ground.

Ida handed her a water gourd. "Is running the risk of being attacked by a lion responsible?"

She drank and then replied, "I guess not. I want to complete what I start before I forget it."

Ida nodded. "Sometimes one person's idea of a responsible way to act can seem the lazy, or wrong, way to another. Guess that's how you often feel?"

"Yeah. Guess so."

Ellie snorted and walked over to sniff her.

Corandra reached up to hug the camel's nose. Her best friend, she meant almost as much as Henry. Even if she did push him

aside. His laughter and his eyes had always been part of her life. No matter how angry everyone else was; he had always been there to listen to how she felt, and fix things when she broke them. She would fix the past for him, for all he had done for her.

Jorn returned with Gerry close behind.

Gerry hurried up the walkway into the mill. The sun glinted on his hair. He hurried into the entry.

"I wish he had stayed. I want to know what it is for," Corandra said.

Jorn grunted. "You've a one track mind. He'll be back. We have a long way to go before dark." He shoved a fur wrapped packet back into her gatherboard and glared at Corandra.

A bump from high in the strange lodge startled them, and they all looked up.

Ida and Brael glanced at each other, at Jorn, and then back at Corandra.

Gerry ran back down the walkway carrying a long thin tube. "One I can share." He handed it to Jorn.

Jorn held it up to his eye. He grunted and tucked it into his gatherboard. "Guess we better be going."

He turned to walk back along the path they had made.

Gerry had answers she needed. Henry was missing. Which was more important?

"Wait." Gerry grabbed Jorn's arm. "I go with you."

"No."

"Yes." Gerry ran down a path beside the mill.

"I wish he wouldn't alert his mother," Jorn said.

"He may not," Ida said. "We will wait."

Corandra rubbed Ellie's nose. Her head still spun if she moved too fast.

Gerry returned with a gatherboard, another male, and a horse. The unknown male went up the walkway and into the mill.

"Go now," Gerry said.

The horse he rode neighed at Ellie and the other two camels.

"On to Tuttle then. Falena will expect us." Jorn glared at Gerry and at Corandra. "No running off alone you two."

Gerry laughed. "Diedre wouldn't like. Stories though."

Corandra rode beside Gerry.

"Tell me about the mills, what do you use them for?"

"Water for food. Other reasons, sometimes."

"You two will be lost if you don't allow me to lead." Jorn panted

from hobbling so fast.

Corandra dropped back beside Ida.

Ida glanced at her. "Gerry looks like Henry, doesn't he?"

She nodded. "I thought he was."

"His sponsor's sister's child, I think. We'll ask Jorn later."

Jorn had been in a hurry to leave Mills. Too much of a hurry. He had to be hiding something from her.

"We stop here for the night," Jorn said. "By morning, I should be able to check on the young men we left with the boats."

Corandra yawned. She'd have to wake early and go out on her own with Ellie. Jorn was too obnoxious to be around. Warm and drowsy, she ignored Ida and Jorn sitting by the fire. A warm blanket pulled over her invited sleep.

Chirping birds woke her in the morning.

Jorn sat beside the lake and watched the sleepers.

Corandra sat up. No way to leave on her own now. It'd be fun to be with them when she introduced Gerry to the Pit Miners anyway. He looked so much like Henry; everyone would think he was Henry.

"We better be going soon," Jorn said. "We have to try to make the one and half day trip in one day, if we can."

"Sure you don't want to ride?" Brael said.

"Never have, never will." Jorn strode off into the grass leaving the others scrambling to catch up.

Corandra on Ellie, and Gerry, on his horse rode behind Brael and Ida. He didn't say a word to her, and watched ahead. Corandra and Ellie drifted along in the Grass Sea. Much like before, when they had gone off together, she longed for solitude. Being alone too long wouldn't be good. She didn't dare stray too far.

Off to the south, a dark spot peeked over the grass.

Ellie slowed down. When Gerry rode ahead to talk to Jorn, she turned Ellie off to figure out what that dark spot in the distance was. The dark spot grew as they approached.

## Chapter 39

Rusty and Jasey hurried down the moonlit trail that she and Ambrena had confidentially ridden to Shims so many days before. Then, there had been hope in finding a cure for the illness that besieged Shells. Now, she wondered what she would find in Shims.

The trail ended in front of the Shims' lodges. People shaped forms littered the ground.

A chill swept through Rusty. It would soon be too cold for people to sleep outside. Where had all these people come from? Had Shims already been attacked?

Jasey gripped her hand.

Rusty ran to the first person. She almost laughed when a snore woke the puppy hiding under Nala's arm. Two girls slept next to her.

Quan would be near the fire, or in his lodge. She picked her way to the fire pit. A shivering wind made the wide, low burning fire feel remarkably warm on her bare arms. At last, she stumbled her way past all the sleeping people, and to Quan's hunched figure. She sat down close to him, her hands held out for warmth. "Ambrena and I are back, we bring the villa of Leana with us to help. Dan found us at the lake near their villa."

Quan nodded. "That is good. We will talk with Wenda in the morning. For now, let Jasey go to her."

Jasey nodded and scurried off to his lodge.

Rusty waited.

"You left them," Quan said.

"The children could walk no further. They made it to Tuttle."

"Tomorrow, will be soon enough to plan. Sleep now."

Rusty stood up and turned to find an empty place to sleep. Before she could go, she had to ask one last question. "How are Henry and Corandra?"

Quan shook his head and closed his eyes.

New worries would make her heart ache all night. She had to find Wenda now. Wenda would answer.

At Wenda's entry, she knocked. "May I come in?"

"Of course," Wenda said.

Rusty stepped in.

Wenda's tears glistened in the firelight as she held her son. "I am so thankful you brought him safely back to Shims."

"I hope Corandra and Henry stayed in Shells. They did, didn't

they?"

Wenda hugged Jasey tighter. She shook her head. "Corandra is with Ida and Brael. Aren't they with you?"

Rusty shook her head. "Henry is safe?"

Jasey slid off Wenda's lap.

"No." Wenda's lip quivered. "He was attacked. We don't know where he is. We planned to search for them tomorrow."

Rusty slid down to the floor. Thoughts raced through her mind. Henry was her only relative. Now he was gone. Ambrena would probably go to Shells and tell them everything, and she'd have to face his death all alone.

Wenda grabbed her to keep her from falling into the fire. "Rusty, we will find him. I know we will. Did you come alone?"

Jasey grabbed his mother's hands, and made motions in the air, and drew something in a pit of ashes beside the fire.

Rusty was too tired and upset to care. She rolled over and faced the wall, and let the pain overtake her.

Wenda touched her arm. "Here, drink some tea. We need you today."

"Is it morning?"

Wenda nodded. "Jasey left to watch for your friends. Quan will come, and we will find Henry."

Rusty struggled to sit up. "Kees and Tree Burb are both a danger to us."

Wenda handed her some dried meat to eat. "Tell me what you know."

She told her everything Marken had said about both Kees and Tree Burb. "Do you know anything about them?"

"Very little. From what we've seen, Tree Burb has no animals. They do hunt, and they may be one of the groups we have seen on the river. I don't know. As long as they don't bother us, we've never bothered, or spoken, to them." Wenda gazed at the fire.

"Never to learn anything they might remember that our villas have forgotten?" Rusty leaned forward.

"Selfish, isn't it? We should have. A few hunters have met them, and though no words were spoken, a brandishing of spears always happens. A show of force. Not enough trust to meet, and try to speak."

Jasey ran into the lodge, gesturing frantically.

Wenda's face paled. She jumped up and ran out screaming

orders to the noisy early morning crowd.

Jasey raced by on his camel.

Children ran from the river to the treasury. Adults hurried to grab spears and stood around the villa's edges. Before long, elephants trumpeted as they walked into the villa of Shims. They pushed their way past the screaming Pit Miners, straight for the river, and a drink.

Rusty jumped up and tripped over her gatherboard. A fur rolled out. The one Dover had given her. She picked it up and turned it around in her hand. Then, she hurried out to find Ambrena.

The people from Leana seemed almost more familiar to Rusty than the Pit Miners. Maybe because she mostly saw the non-Shells Pit Miners during festivals, and not every day. Ambrena and Marken were nowhere in sight.

Rusty watched and waited on Ambrena to arrive. When she saw no sign of her, she turned away. A choice had to be made. Go to Tree Burb and rescue her brother, or to Kees to be sure that neither Tree Burb, nor their own villas, would be attacked again.

She returned to the fire in Wenda's lodge. Her fingers sifted the ash in the ash pit. It filtered between them to the ground.

The ash gave Jasey an opportunity to communicate with his mother, even if no one else understood it. Or, perhaps some did.

Rusty scattered the ashes in Jasey's circle. Somehow, touching the ashes, and sifting them through her fingers, comforted her. Alone away from everyone she had known, the hole in her heart for her missing brother, Ambrena, Corandra, and Glenna ached. She didn't dare think of Zande. His memory flittered on the edge, and she pushed it away. Today she could not dwell in a future that wouldn't happen.

Wenda, Quan, Lavina, Brix, and the leader of Leana joined her.

"I think we should go straight to Tree Burb," Wenda said.

Brix shook his head. "No. I have the directions to Kees from Marken. We have to show the people of Tree Burb that the people who attacked them will no longer do so."

"Tree Burb could attack those we leave behind while we are gone," Wenda said.

"Perhaps. From what Marken, Vendon, Xile, and Yall told us, I don't think so. I also don't think Kees is crowded. He said most of the fighters were to the south, stranded by the storm they survived. We owe it to them, to ourselves, and to Tree Burb, to verify the level of danger Kees currently is to all of us."

Leana's leader requested the talk circle. "You think it's best to go

to Kees first?"

Brix nodded.

She glanced at Rusty. "Many of my people are not ready to fight. They have had little training other than in hunting. If you are correct, many could stay behind to guard this villa while the better hunters could go to Kees." She handed the talk circle over to Wenda.

"Perhaps. We could send a few scouts in the direction of Tree Burb. Ultimately, it is up to Rusty."

Brix requested the talk circle. "I do not know where Tree Burb is. Marken promised to come tomorrow, to lead a group there. I do not know if we can reach Kees and return in one day. I do know a small group of hunters can move more swiftly than the large group we would need if we do not verify Kees position first."

Leana's leader nodded. "You trust Marken?"

Rusty glanced up. "He will be true to his word. Unless Ambrena begs him to stay in Shells."

Brix, Quan, Wenda, and Leana's leader smiled, and looked away from the firelight.

Brix took the talk circle. "Quan, perhaps, we should send one of Brael's assistants to check on Ambrena and Shells if they do not return. I wouldn't blame Marken if he did stay with Ambrena."

Wenda gasped and handed the talk circle to Quan.

"Jasey has been sent to bring Marken and Ambrena. Dover and Zella must know Henry is safe. Wenda, you must quickly train the Leana group. Rusty must lead them tomorrow." He handed the talk circle to Lavina.

Lavina gulped as she grasped it. "Our scouts have seen more horses that do not belong to any of our villas. Webbel has been searched. We must go." She glanced at Quan and handed the talk circle to Rusty.

Rusty looked to Wenda.

"Take it. What do you intend to do?" Wenda leaned toward her.

A tiny whimper escaped as Rusty reached for the talk circle. She had never held one at a meeting. There had been no need for one before she left Shells in her skill as dig leader. Her left hand took the talk circle and knocked the fur out of her right hand. A tiny wooden charm fell out into the ash pit. One she had never seen.

She picked it up, and held it toward the fire. It had six sharp points, and a hole in the center to be strung on a necklace. "What is it?"

Quan held out his hand and took it. He waved at Rusty.

She blushed. Of course, she held the talk circle. Her hand wavered as she passed the circle to him.

He lifted the charm, and tilted it in the light. "I cannot say. Dover gave you this?"

She nodded.

"We will train now. Rusty will lead us tomorrow. Any opposed?"

No one motioned for the talk circle.



## Chapter 40

Ambrena slept restlessly, tossing and turning. Unsure, and worried about the following day. Taking Falena to a sister who didn't know she existed. And Marken to the only mother she remembered. Zella and Tanna's reaction would show her if they wanted her to come back to Shells, or this trip had been their first effort to turn her away from the one villa she remembered.

At some point, Marken's hand reached for hers, and her tossing and turning stilled. At least, if Tanna sent her away for good, she wouldn't have to travel the Grass Sea alone. They could both search for a new villa, together. Maybe somewhere, far away, they would find another person who wanted to be a part of their life, whether in the same villa, or a nearby one.

Morning, and the flurry of activity that accompanied it, woke Ambrena. She was mostly alone inside the treasury. Several small children ran, tripped, and fell over the heaps of blankets and gatherboards scattered around. At least Leana had not left her behind. The blanket fell off her shoulders, and she shivered. Winter was coming. They could not travel alone, or only as two. Maybe Tanna would allow them to stay until spring, perhaps in Trapper's old lodge.

Falena walked into the treasury. "Hi Ambrena. Didn't want to wake you too soon. Figured we'd wait until everyone else left for the villa they are going to today. It'd be too confusing otherwise." She sat down beside Ambrena and handed her some tea.

Ambrena took it and sipped carefully. The temperature was perfect for drinking.

"I figured you could tell me stories about my sister. I've already said my goodbyes to family and friends."

Ambrena's eyes met Falena's over the cup, "Is your son going with us?"

Falena shook her head. "He's a great hunter. One of the best. He felt he needed to go and save the villas. Plus, he said, if the illness spreads, he'd be safe from it."

Ambrena nodded. Smart choice. They could easily have carried the illness to everyone they had met in their travels. Maybe they had, and that was why Tuttle had joined Shims. Dan hadn't said anything, though he may not know.

Soon, Brix led the main group of Leana south to Shims.

Ambrena shouldered her gatherboard and started the walk to Shells with a heavy heart.

Marken walked beside her, not speaking.

Falena walked behind her with Treny, Shara, and Wit by her side.

If their thoughts were half as scared as hers, and she knew they had to be, this short journey would feel as if it stretched into next season.

She wanted to cheer everyone up. After all, Falena would be facing a sister she had never met. Marken a potential villa to join, if they accepted him. Treny would be facing the ghost of her past in Zella and Tanna's face. Ambrena trudged along. Her voice cracked when she tried to speak. "Marken, tell us a river story."

The sound of hoofs racing hurried them off the path.

Jasey pulled to a stop beside them. He waved his arms, and pulled at Ambrena.

"We need to go back?"

He nodded. His camel danced under his feet.

"I am sorry Falena, I must go. I want to see Zella too."

Falena touched her arm. "We'll all go. No one should travel alone."

It didn't take long to return to Tuttle. With Jasey unable to tell them anything, what awaited them remained an unknown cold knot deep in her stomach. Anything could have happened in Shims overnight.

At almost midday, they reached Tuttle again. Another set of hooves thundered in their direction. Ida and Brael raced into the clearing and stopped before them.

"Are you alone?" Ida asked.

"Just us," Ambrena said. "We'd planned to go to Shells until Jasey came for us."

"Gerry and Jorn will catch up soon, and we'll walk with you," Brael said.

Shara and Wit played and sang as they waited. Ida, Brael, and Jasey waited quietly. Almost invisible signs passed between them.

A large horse walked into the clearing through the tall grass. On its back rode a man so like Henry, Ambrena gasped.

He smiled as he looked down at her. "Hi."

A gaunt man with a cane hobbled beside him.

"Hi. It's good to see Jorn." Ambrena's voice wavered. "We better

go. I've no idea why Jasey came back for us."

Shara reached for her hand and walked between her and Marken.

Gerry rode silently behind them, with Jorn hobbling at his side.

Once they reached Shims the rest of the day rushed by in preparations. No one knew what to expect. Wenda would keep a group to watch Shims and Shells, while Leana would go with Rusty and Ambrena.

Shims was so crowded with people, that Marken and Ambrena walked down to the riverside after the evening meal to be near the horses. "We'll ride tomorrow," he said.

She nodded and kicked her heels in the water. It was almost peaceful from the villa's rumble of voices behind them, and moving water in front of them.

A branch shifted and Gerry walked up to them. "Brena, artifacts." He held out his hand.

With no idea what he wanted, she stared at him.

Gerry drew two rectangles in the dirt. "Artifacts. Took mine, and yours."

"One was yours?" How could one of them be his?

He nodded. "Know how to make it work past speaking."

Ambrena clutched Marken's hand. "You watched us!"

He nodded. "Always watch Kees. Fraid of their leaders. Some not so bad." Gerry glanced at Marken. His hand still out, he waited.

"I don't have them with me. They are in Wenda's lodge."

"After tomorrow then?"

To find out how the box worked could answer so many questions. She nodded. He'd have to show her, since he had so much trouble speaking.

It was a long night of stars blinking and dogs howling as children cried and clung to mothers and sponsors who would leave soon.

Ambrena joined Rusty and the group gathered around the fire as the sun's rays graced the horizon.

"Rusty, take this, and look through it as you go," Jorn handed her a long thin tube. "I won't be going with you. I'll stay in Shims with Quan."

He hobbled off to Quan's lodge. No fight left in him, though he could tell others how, and what needed to be done, to save the community he had abandoned so long ago.

Ambrena clasped her spear. She might not be able to stab

anyone, even with his lessons last night. She'd try, to keep him from having to fight to save the children here.

Even with all the preparations the day before, it was nearly midday before they left Shims. Ambrena, Marken, and Rusty rode elephants. Those on horses followed behind. Many from Leana walked together behind all the animals. It would be a long walk.

Mid-afternoon, and the late fall sunshine slanted long along the tops of the grass. Rusty had said she would call camp soon. The lead elephant stopped and Rusty held the long tube up to her eye. Her hands shook as she dropped it to her lap.

"I see something I don't recognize."

"What is it?" Ambrena asked.

Rusty held a finger to her lips. "Slip off, all of you. We can fight better on the ground."

Once on the ground she gathered her closest advisors together. "Brix? What can we do?"

He held his spear at the ready. "What did you see?"

"Lots of spears sticking up in the grass."

Marken squeezed Ambrena's hand and turned to face the direction they had been riding.

An elephant trumpeted.

Spears flew at them.

Rusty grabbed Ambrena.

Marken, and those from Leana with spears, ran ahead.

Screams rent the air as the attack began.

Ambrena grabbed her spear and followed Marken.

He was on the ground with his head over the face of someone.

She touched his shoulder as screams echoed around them.

He glanced up with tears in his eyes.

On the ground lay Henry's body with Marken's spear pinning him down. Blood pooled around the spear point in his shoulder.

"I saw the spear, and movement. I didn't know," Marken said.

Ambrena gulped, pushed him aside, and reached for Henry's head to see the damage done.

"Keep Rusty away, and stop this battle! It's a mistake!" Ambrena turned back to Henry.

Marken mumbled something, and stumbled away.

# Chapter 41

A dark peak towered over a sloping base. All around the base, bits of the same strange stone lay scattered in unusual broken lines throughout the grass.

Corandra steered Ellie through the maze of lines. In places, the rock had broken down to mere pebbles. She slid off and left Ellie to nibble the grass. Safe from hunters, with plenty of food available; rodents, snakes, spiders, and small reptiles would find an area like this an excellent place to live.

Sure enough, snakes and lizards slithered off the rocks, into the grass, and away from her feet. A few birds circled high above the peak. Sprigs of grass sprung up along its sides. Wild chickens of all types fluttered, protecting their nests from her exploring feet. From a distance, the dark mound had appeared over the top of the grass. Up close, she realized it was at least six adults high.

She scrambled up the sides. Rocks slipped and slid, disturbed by her weight. On top, many were grey. The sections revealed underneath the grass and dirt were darker. It might be dirt blown inside the rocks in the wind. At the top, a depression, like a cooking bowl stretched the length of her arm.

Corandra reached and felt the sides and bottom of the bowl shape. Smoothed by rain and wind, it felt safe enough. She crawled into it, and sat, staring into space. From this vantage point, she tried to imagine what the broken lines of stones must have meant to the ancestors. Most roamed from north to south, though a few filtered east to west. The longer she looked at it, the colder she felt. She shivered, realizing this must have been an important place for the ancestors. What it meant she didn't know.

Her foot moved and dislodged a stone, uncovering a hole. The sun's rays illuminated the hole. Corandra gasped. Something was there. A small box had been hidden inside the stone bowl. Her foot touched it. Already, she had nearly destroyed her community by opening one box dug out of the ground. If she opened this box, something bad could happen again.

She took a deep breath and reached for the box. Almost as big as a large cooking pot. If she opened it here, it would hurt only her. Far smaller than the red box she had opened, this one was yellow. Something about the color of yellow, and the shattered landscape brought back an elusive memory. Zella had said something long

ago, when she and Henry were toddlers. It was elusive now, rather like a spider's web, where she could almost hear a word or two, though their specific connections were lost in memory.

Carrying the box, she scrambled back down to Ellie. Sliding down was more painful than crawling up. Rocks scraped her arms and legs. Fallen rocks littered the side of whatever this was. Many other people and animals had climbed here before, and dislodged the stones.

She searched through the stones for a specific type of rock. If she could find them, she could go back to the top and draw the lines she had seen. Perhaps they would mean something to Zella.

A wild chicken above her fluttered to her nest.

Corandra's scrambling must have a loosened a support.

An egg slipped out and bounced twice before splattering above her head.

She groaned. Egg yellows would work better than nothing. She ran to Ellie and pulled a cooking cover out of her gatherboard. Egg yellow, and cloth in hand, she pulled herself back to the top of the mound. Once there, she focused on drawing with a twig as best she could the lines of stone. It wasn't perfect, and the sun wouldn't dry it as fast as in the summer.

While she waited, she picked up the fur Jorn had tossed on top of her gatherboard. Dover had given it to her. In the rush and flurry, it had been forgotten, shoved well below the food in her pack. She held it close, afraid to open it. Had he given her a gift she could use now? Or, had he given her the black rock that meant he wanted her to find a new, permanent villa?

She didn't dare let Ida, Brael, or Henry, see what he had determined. Now she was alone. Prayer to the Goddesses wouldn't help. The decision had already been made. She coughed. Her throat felt a little raw. There had been a lot wind in the Grass Sea. Zella would know if this cough was something to worry about.

The packet slid to her lap and opened. Her fingers reached for the string that slid out. Her heart beat faster. The string slid out of the packet to reveal three charms. One shell, one spear, and one shaped like Ellie.

The clouds around her couldn't answer her questions. Adulthood ceremony wouldn't be until spring. Usually, the villa and skill designation were added then. So, was the spear to symbolize her belonging to, or moving to Webbel? Or did they expect her to be a hunter with Henry? And a charm made like Ellie? Did they want her

to replace gen three Erin and lead the herds? It made no sense.

A tear dribbled her cheek and landed on the egg painting. It was dry. She'd have to hurry. Slipping and sliding down the hill was easier now, even though she carried the pieces of fur wrapped against her heart. She Placed the painted cooking cover, and the box in her gatherboard before she hurried back to Ellie. Returning to Zella now was of utmost importance. Searching for those she had been riding with didn't matter, as they were moving slowly anyway.

Once out of the broken line of rocks, she steered Ellie in the direction she believed Shells would be. If she were right, she'd be there before dark. If she were wrong, she'd be lost in the Grass Sea.

## Chapter 42

The fire burned in Wenda's lodge. Henry lay on the ground wrapped in blankets and furs. Rusty rubbed the fur, not wanting to waken him. Ambrena had said he needed rest. A tear slipped down her cheek.

His hand reached for hers. "The elephants. I was leading Tree Burb. We thought the elephants meant it was Kees attacking again."

She nodded. The story had been repeated. Everyone knew now that the two groups had attacked each other, both thinking the other group was attacking them. The ancestor's tales said battles had often started that way.

"Rest. Ambrena said you'll be fine."

His eyes closed. "Forgive me."

"You stayed with them."

"They needed help." Henry's hand clasped the fur. "They, and we, need protection. I have to lead them to find who attacked them."

Rusty clasped his hand. "I'm going to lead the Leana villa in the morning. We will find Kees. Marken said they aren't all bad. Be better before I come back." As long as he didn't develop a fever he should be fine, though the spear had damaged his shoulder. There was no way to know at this point if it would lead to permanent damage.

His eyes closed. Water drops formed on his forehead.

She touched it. Hopefully, he was too close to the fire. Brix could move him, when he returned.

Fear of the future hung in the air. Several people from Tree Burb had been wounded and would stay in Shims until they could safely return to their own community. A few from Leana had been injured too. Thankfully, no one had died. The Goddesses had spared them that horror.

Jasey returned and played in the ash pit, drawing symbols she didn't recognize. If Henry survived, she'd come back, and learn them. They might be valuable. Like Zella's letter drawings once meant something.

One of them looked vaguely familiar. She stood over him and stared. It was a picture of the items on the table in the tiny lodge at the pit. Jasey had remembered. She squinted at the drawing. "Can you leave it till we return?"

He nodded, adding lines and more detail.



"He can sketch it on bark, if you want," Wenda said.

"Zella may need it to help us," Rusty said.

The small pile of bark now made sense.

Jasey sorted through it. He took a twig and placed it in the fire enough to char the edges. When he drew on a plain piece, it left marks. Before long, he had to re-char the end. It took several tries before he completed the drawing and placed it in her hands.

She held the drawing up into the light. A good image of what they had seen. "Do you remember the drawings it showed?"

He nodded slowly. On another bark, he charred what he could remember and held it up to her.

Rusty jumped for joy. "Would you take these to Zella now?"

Jasey frowned and pointed at her.

"I know you want to go. We will have so many with us. You can help this way."

Sad eyes pouting, he looked away and picked up his huntboard.

"Wenda, Brix, come outside," Ida shouted.

Hopefully Corandra had arrived. Rusty stepped outside.

A man on horseback stared at her.

Something about his face was familiar. The sun peeked out from behind a cloud and covered his face. He looked so much like Henry, she gasped.

Ida laughed. "Yes Rusty, Gerry is your sponsor's sister's son. We had to be sure Corandra's eyes didn't deceive her."

Rusty had heard mention of Gerry after they returned to Shims. She hadn't seen him. His resemblance to Henry was remarkable.

"Is Corandra with you?" Rusty glanced back at Ida.

"Isn't she here?" Ida glanced around the crowd of Pit Miners and Leana Maze.

A yell turned their attention to the pathway. Marken, Ambrena, and Treny walked into the crowded clearing.

Ambrena hurried up to her. "How is Henry?"

"He said a few words." Rusty hugged her.

Another hunting scout ran up to Wenda. "Tree Burb are back safe. They have an interesting place there. No sign of trouble. Or animals, between there and here. Almost too quiet."

"We will go in the morning," Wenda said. "We need new spear tips, and food prepared."

In the morning, people gathered in the order they had discussed the night before. With so many here, they could easily reach Kees and leave Shims protected.

Traveling had never been Rusty's idea of a good way to spend a day. Now, it was even less so. Every passing day might endanger Henry, if he was even still alive. A fever could kill him in days. She couldn't be there to hold his hand if she went to Kees. Her brother, or her villa. That was the choice.

Meeting Gerry hadn't changed her opinion. He wasn't Henry. Mannerisms, speech, and even thought processes were so different. Gerry was hiding something. What, she didn't know.

Corandra was still missing.

Gerry spoke fondly of meeting her, and then she disappeared. He said he tried to follow, and Jorn told him not to.

If he really cared, he would have followed her anyway and brought her back to Shims. All their troubles started with sending Corandra off on her own, and that red box.

Rusty closed her mouth, and her mind to the beauty of midday in the open Grass Sea. She wanted to live in Shells, work in Shelpit, live with Glenna, and have Henry nearby. If only Zande had lived. So many if only's. Had any gen ever lived in peace?

"Wenda, has anyone heard if anybody else died in Shells?"

"I haven't heard of any," Wenda said. "However, Quan and I haven't had much opportunity to talk about Shells. I am sure they are fine there. He has sent runners, and hasn't recounted any of their conversations to me."

"I hope Tanna, Zella, Dover, Robin and everyone else there are recovering from the illness. I want a lodge to go back to. If they'll have me." The tall grass before them stretched out endlessly, broken by tiny batches of shrub peeking over the tops in places.

Wenda didn't respond. Her lack of words meant more than empty, pleasing words, would mean.

The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to never dig again. What would Zella say when she said that? Would she be able to find someone else to train to search for a dig place? There might not even be any artifacts left. From what Marken had said, they'd have to watch out for the villas down the river, where Kees other members had been stranded. The other villas along the river might become dangerous if the fighting survivors joined them.

Somehow, she and Henry would find a place, if he survived. Perhaps, he might even consider living with the strange people of Tree Burb. After all, he had stayed with them to protect them.

## Chapter 43

Shara grabbed Ambrena's hand. She chatted and pointed at birds. "I wish we could fly like them. We'd be able to see my sister sooner!"

Falena laughed, strained as it was. "Now, don't be too excited. Corandra might be at Shims."

Shara danced around in a circle and shouted, "Well if she is, we'll fly right back there and find her!" She ran off down the path.

Marken glanced at Ambrena. "It goes clear to Shells, right?"

Ambrena almost nodded. "No, there is a break to Klapit. No one goes there now. Though Rusty was sent there to check it before we left."

They needn't have worried. Shara raced back down the path, grabbed Ambrena's hand, and pulled her as fast as she could.

Marken laughed, grabbed Shara's hand gently, and caused her to let go of Ambrena. "We can't run as fast you can. Slow down, or dance ahead of us."

Shara laughed. She stayed ahead, dancing, running forward, and back.

Near the Klapit trail, howling monkeys threw nuts and shells at Shara.

Back to their sides she raced, hands over her head to protect it. "What are they?"

"The monkeys shouldn't hurt you. They'll let us pass, and go on about their day. Stay quiet, and they'll stop throwing things." Ambrena reached her hand to the startled child.

Shara looked up into her eyes with the same admiration that Pamma used to give her, not so long ago. Ambrena's heart lurched. She longed to hug Shara and comfort her, as a mother would a scared child.

Treny made no move to call her daughter to her. Of course, she was busy comforting Wit, who had screamed when a nut hit his head.

Ambrena's eyes closed. She wanted a daughter of her own. She had helped Tanna with the birth of three children. The birth process scared her, perhaps because she knew it could result in death. Lasting childhood laughter would make it all worthwhile. As long as they lived, and didn't die as Zande had.

How Treny had ever left Corandra behind had always been

beyond her understanding. Was she now abandoning her second daughter, because of Shara's interest in the sister she had never known? Ambrena shook her head and lowered her eyes. She couldn't look at Treny to guess what she was really thinking.

A root nearly tripped her, although she was looking at the ground.

Marken grabbed her, to keep her from falling. "You okay?"

Ambrena nodded. "I hope everyone is okay in Shells. I feel like I have been gone far too long."

"You have," he said. "Everything in your world has changed, while their world has stayed the same. Now, you are bringing some of your new world to them."

Ambrena shook her head. "I don't know if anyone else has died. Dan said he thought Glenna left, and went back to Yananda's in Almond."

"Rusty and Corandra won't be there either, and you'll miss those three the most, won't you?" Marken looked into her eyes.

Ambrena nodded. "Everyone I am closest to may be gone."

Falena touched her shoulder. "We will be there with you. Don't be afraid."

Marken took Shara's hand and walked ahead with her.

"You are usually the strong one?" Falena shifted her gatherboard to keep it from falling.

"I learned the healing skills of both types, the mental and the physical. I did everything I could to find my skill."

"I am sure they've missed you while you've been gone."

"Then why did they send me away? They knew there was no answer in Shims."

Falena walked on in silence for ways. "Look deep inside. What would you tell Rusty or Corandra? I think you'll find the answer."

Wit cried again.

Falena took him from his mother.

Treny caught up with her daughter.

Ambrena watched them all, walking in front of her now. All their physical burdens were nearly the same size and weight. Their emotional ones varied. Falena was the freest of the adults. She'd always have a villa to go back to. Marken's weight didn't appear to trouble him with the laughing child at his side. She knew his inner pain and fear. Treny, she couldn't decipher. Was it fear, excitement, or even anger at being forced back here that she felt? Was she so afraid of losing a second daughter, that she would give her away to

the first person who came along, rather than face her first daughter?

Her feet felt heavier with each step. Before, she had always been the one to lighten the load for others. Today, it wouldn't happen. They reached the horse lodge. At first glance, it was empty. Then, a horse whinnied, and several raced from the brushy shadow at the other end.

Ambrena took the lead as they came nearer the villa of Shells.

Dogs barked an alert at her, and the strangers in her midst. Hens cackled.

Children ran out of lodges to stare at the strangers, a rare sight.

Ambrena gulped.

She walked to the treasury hoping Zella and Tanna would be there. Alone.

Marken glanced at her.

A little girl ran up to her. It wasn't Pamma.

"Are Zella and Tanna in the treasury?"

The girl nodded and took her hand.

The people of Shells stepped out of lodges and followed them.

Ambrena stopped at the open entry. She felt as if she were spying.

Tanna and Robin, played with Ola, lying on a fur between them.

Zella and Dover sorted windsun covers nearby.

Marken brushed her arm.

Ambrena stepped inside.

Tanna gasped and dropped a string on Ola's face.

Robin sat up straighter.

Zella and Dover turned to the entry.

## Chapter 44

The grass waved in front of Corandra. She sneezed again. The sun sunk over the Grass Sea. She wouldn't make it to Shells tonight. In fact, she wasn't sure where Shells was located.

A backward glance showed no sign of Ellie's travels. Almost as if she had been dropped from the sky into the spot she stood. The grass all around was unbroken.

A warm forehead in the setting sun wasn't normal for this season. Corandra had to find a safe place to sleep for the night, and go on in the morning. She pushed on until she reached a pond. At least there was brush she could hide underneath.

Ellie dashed for the water. Corandra slid off into the water and drank beside her. Staying in the water all night would be safer, with not feeling well. She struggled to tread water, and looked around.

A beaver lodge rose up in the middle of the pond. An unusual place, as they were normally on pond edges, or in the middle of a stream. It must mean lions visited regularly, or water levels changed often. She urged Ellie to the lodge, while holding on to her tail. Scrambling up the side was painful. Her knees scraped on the sticks and twigs that held the lodge together.

With what strength remained, she pulled her gatherboard off Ellie's back and slid to a sitting position on the woven twigs. It would be a long night. A few deep breaths hurt her chest. Too tired to look for food, she stretched out as well as she could on the rocking lodge.

A lion roared in the distance.

Corandra rolled over and splashed into the water.

Ellie lipped her hand.

Something brushed against her legs in the water.

Corandra jumped back onto the lodge.

A beaver hopped out of the water and chattered at her.

The lion roared again, closer.

At the edge of the pond, two yellow spots glowed in the moonlight.

Panting, she pulled herself onto the lodge roof and waited. A lion wouldn't normally swim. Ellie wouldn't be much protection. She couldn't let Ellie sacrifice herself. If no one came for her, she'd never make it back to Shells without her.

Ellie stayed close.

Corandra leaned against her.

The ledge Ellie stood on kept her knees above the water, barely. More yellow spots flickered on and off around the pond.

Corandra dozed as she could. A lack of sleep wouldn't help when morning came. Somehow, she had to escape the lions and find her way across the Grass Sea to Shells.

Sometime during the night, she moved and part of the lodge fell in. The dunking in the water felt cool and refreshing. Submerging would end all of her troubles, and the troubles she had brought to the Pit Miners. No one would know. Lacking the energy to swim or hold on, she floated on her back.

Something nudged her.

She pulled away.

A beaver swam at her feet, and Ellie stood by her side.

Dying here would probably kill this beaver, and his or her whole lodge. Corandra gulped. She had to struggle to reach the lodge. Or, swim into the lion's mouth.

The bright spots on the beach hypnotized her. She wanted to go to them, and offer herself into their gaze. Her arms couldn't pull her through the water.

The lion roared. More bright yellow spots blinked open and stared in her direction.

Ellie nuzzled her closer to the lodge.

The beaver leaped to the top, pulling twigs that had fallen into the water and chattering.

Corandra gasped and shivered in the moonlight. She pulled herself back onto the lodge and felt her forehead. Clammy and cold now. Not a good sign. Zande and his death danced in her memory. She hugged her knees, shivered, and waited. Water on her cheeks could be from the pond, or tears.

The sun peeked over the horizon of tall grass.

Several lions snoozed beside the pond.

No way she could escape without them noticing, and following her and Ellie. No food for Ellie either.

With a sigh, she pulled her damp fur around her shoulders. The sun would not be summer warm today. Chills racked her body. She tried to nibble dried nutria, only to find her throat too tight to swallow. As the heat welled up inside again, she slipped into the water and drank deeply.

She couldn't escape from the lions. However, she could help the beaver. Swimming no more than a few body lengths away, she

pulled the twigs back to the beaver lodge, so it could be more easily repaired. Ellie helped, pushing those around her toward Corandra.

With as many gathered as she could reach, she pulled herself back onto the lodge to warm up in the sun.

Ellie would have to climb out of the water soon. The ledge she had been standing on kept her feet in the water, and that would be dangerous.

Corandra couldn't watch her go. She pulled a large stick from the pile, and climbed on Ellie's back. They'd have to try to escape.

She turned the camel as far from the lions as she could.

Ellie swam toward the shore. As she scrambled up the bank, a lion's roar startled them.

It jumped out from behind a pile of brush.

Corandra slid off and back into the water.

Ellie turned and swam back to the beaver lodge.

Water covered her eyes, and she pulled herself above the water level enough to see the yellow paw turned toward her. If Goddess Kafa were here now, she would either save her, or swallow her. She went limp, and closed her eyes so she couldn't see the lion's jaws as they reached closer.

A thundering of hooves and splashing all around, startled her. Opening her eyes, she saw a herd of zebra racing into the pond.

Lions roared and attacked.

Spears flew at the lions.

Zebras squealed. One close to Corandra had streaks of blood on its flanks.

Corandra grabbed its mane, to avoid being trampled.

The noise, confusion, and splashing of water finally ended.

Opening her eyes again, she found herself on a dry fur near the water's edge.

A fire blazed nearby. A man, not much older than she, sat beside it. He looked in her direction, though he seemed to be looking right through her.

She lifted herself up on her elbow. Something about him was familiar.

He held his finger to his lip and stirred a cooking bowl. Before long, he brought her a gourd of warm broth.

She reached for the gourd, and her fingers tingled as she touched his. Strange. He was real, wasn't he?

Her eyes looked toward, and through his. She shivered. The tea tasted strange. Bitter. Much like one of Zella's medicines, though



with a different taste. After draining the gourd, she handed it back. If the drink had been poisoned, she wouldn't know. At least she could drift off into sleep, hopefully painlessly. Perhaps the Goddesses had seen fit to let her die this way, instead of as a lion's meal.

He pointed to the fur, picked up his spear, and turned toward the fire.

Something about him was strange. He was there, and he wasn't. His image flickered before her. She had seen something like that somewhere before. Not long ago.

She sighed. Too sore and tired to move, she snuggled under the fur. There'd be no travel today. Returning to Shells with this sickness would be too dangerous. In the morning, she'd try. If she felt better, and found Ellie.

Ellie's lips nuzzled her forehead. She giggled, even though it hurt. Touched the camel's nose, and curled up even tighter.

The wind rustled through the grass, and the fire blazed. Embers leaped and danced before her eyes.

Corandra coughed as she stared at the flames and dozed, remembering Zande's death with every sneeze, cough, or cold chill.

## Chapter 45

A wild river stretched across the landscape. Water cascaded over rocks, and tree branches played tug with frothy bubbles. An untamed wilderness, out of the ancestor's legends. A place to explore, for those more stout of soul than Rusty imagined herself, or Henry.

"We'll turn here," Brix said. "It should be a short walk from here to the villa, no burb, of Kees."

"How many do you think are there?" Rusty asked.

Brix steered his horse down a trail more suited for walking than riding. Kees had to have a wider trail nearby for the elephants. "Surely more than four people attacked Tree Burb."

"The people might have gone looking for Vendon and Xile." If they had, they could be anywhere.

They rode along in silence, with the rest of the hunters behind them. The elephants crushed through the underbrush. The birds no longer sang, and rabbits hopped away from the trail.

Brix and Rusty reached the end of the trail.

Outside, in an open area sat seven shoulder high, long, low, clear lodges. Two had roofs open to the air. Those had grass growing in them. A third grew baby plants, not even producing food, even though growing season was long over.

Rusty walked forward and looked in the fourth and fifth one. Vegetables grew as ripe and ready to eat as the end of summer. Squash, beans, and melons grew together. The closed clear, glass lodge roof had water drops on the tops and sides, making it feel as if she were looking at an underwater garden.

Sunlight shimmered though the glass. Smooth to the touch, it joined with unrusted metal supports. Through the glistening water drops, a beautiful harvest awaited anyone who knew how to reach it. The people of Kees had to be somewhere near, the ones Vendon and Xile left at the burb to repair boats.

"I'll find them. We need this technology of the ancients." Rusty stepped back and peeked over the top of the glass lodges. To be able to grow food all winter, or even into early winter would make life so much easier. Then, a smaller harvest at other seasons wouldn't be an issue. They could travel, meet new people, and not be so bound to one spot during the growing season. If Zella had fresh vegetables anytime for nutria stew, she would be happy. And, with

the glass, the nutria couldn't eat their vegetables.

Brushy trees grew a distance away. Anyone, or anything, could be hiding in them.

"I see the other side of the path," Brix said.

He pointed the way between the glass lodges.

"Wait. Let me go ahead alone. Don't bring the elephants."

"Are you sure?"

Rusty gulped and nodded. The trail between the lodges was too narrow for the elephants. The people of Kees wouldn't risk their glass lodges. Without leaving Brix and the rest of their group where they were, she would have no leverage. A short narrow stick would be strong enough to slice a spider web, not enough to scare people.

She squared her shoulders and stepped into the brush. The short tunnel led to a sunlit open area with many lodges, almost as many as three villas together. No sign of people, barking dogs, or clacking hens. An eerie silence settled around her.

"People of Kees, please come out. We aren't here for revenge against what Vendon and Xile did to us." Rusty glanced quickly across the open area. A few shadows shifted out of sight. No one, and no sound, appeared in front of her.

Leaves rustled behind her. Jasey's "hello" grunt followed.

Rusty glanced back. No one else had followed her. Good. They could check out a few lodges and see if any living people were there. They may have repaired the boats and gone after their families, or even been attacked by Marken's villa. Fear such as this had been unknown to Rusty, since a small child. She didn't welcome it now. Reaching for Jasey's hand, she stepped forward.

They approached the first lodge. Its entry was covered by layered wood. Two body length's away, a dog barked in warning.

Rusty did her best to appear as small and young as Jasey. "Please come out. We've brought your elephants back. We need help."

Jasey pushed the wood piled around the entry away.

A small dog leaped out and barked at them. No one was inside.

"They have to be here somewhere." Rusty gripped Jasey's hand and walked down to the river.

A large wood construction, not at all like the long and thin boats from Leana, was tied to a pile of brush. As long and wide as nearly two average lodges, it jostled on the river's ripples. She could see over the edges and into the boat. Wood boxes and rope were scattered about. Women and children huddled in a corner as far

from the shore as possible.

Spears bristled at her from the front of the boat.

"We are not Vendon and Xile."

"Are they with you?" A male voice asked from behind the boat wall.

"No," Rusty said. "They are not. We brought the elephants back."

A woman's voice yelled from the back of the boat, "You and the boy are not alone."

"No. Trust us. We know what Vendon and Xile did to Tree Burb."

The women hid their faces. Some covered the ears of children.

One man stood up. "Ashamed of what they did. If they'd waited, food would've been ready to harvest. They killed a man, a woman, and two children."

Rusty closed her eyes and nodded. "I guess that is why Tree Burb stole my only brother. They tried to attack us, thinking we were Kees."

She half turned away, with a finger wave to Jasey to remain alert.

"Are you going to leave the elephants?" The man asked.

Rusty shook her head. "I won't be responsible for what they do to your glass lodges." She took two steps back.

The man leaped in front her and pointed his spear at her. "Where did you leave Vendon and Xile?"

Rusty quivered. Desperate to keep her legs and voice from shaking, she reached out and pushed the spear away. "Last they were seen, they were tied to their own huntboards, with two hungry male lions nibbling their noses." She strode into the brush, back toward the path with a signal to Jasey to follow.

If she were right, the people from Kees would follow. If she were wrong, they'd kill her and Jasey. She held her breath and kept walking. When she reached the brushy tunnel, Jasey's hand reached for hers.

Brix and several other people she knew waited across the clearing.

She held up her hand to wait. Her best place for safety, and answers, was in the middle of the glass lodges. When she reached that point, she and Jasey turned to look over the crowd who had followed her from the Kees' boat.

"How many of you are here?" Rusty asked.

One man came forward. "About twenty now. Vendon and Xile had hoped to rescue the other survivors, when we can build another

boat. They went in search of supplies to build a rescue boat."

"He stole me and three others to help him. The pit where your ancestors have dug is mostly empty, much as ours is. There may be more, somewhere. Meanwhile, you have plenty of food. Something we don't have."

The man nodded. "You think supplies are all gone?"

"I'm not so sure the ancients buried these artifacts for us to find and use. We have to learn to make what we need ourselves. Will you promise to not attack Tree Burb, and the Pit Miners?"

"We have no reason to. Anyway, we are mostly the gardeners. The fighters aren't here. They stayed behind, hoping they could survive and hunt until we could return," the man said.

Women and children crowded up behind him. "Where is Yall? She can help us."

Rusty's eyes closed. Her hands rested gently on the glass lodge filled with vegetables ready to be picked. "The elephants stampeded. Ambrena did everything she could to keep Yall alive. Marken is with Ambrena now, or you could ask him."

The woman covered her eyes. "She was our hope. Our only hope. I don't even want to send a boat to the survivors. If we don't, they'll kill us if they ever make it back here."

"Is there a chance they'll manage to return before winter?" Rusty asked.

"Not likely," the spokesman said.

Rusty smiled. "I have a plan. Is your boat trust worthy?"

He nodded.

"Fine. Dismantle your lodges, pack them, and the food, and go north. These glass lodges look like they can be dismantled."

The women nodded. "We move them occasionally to grow on fresher ground."

"Travel beyond the place your people would dig. More villas are up river. Go beyond even them. As far as you can go. If you work hard, a few days should be all you need."

A woman wrung her hands and came up to Rusty. "It'll take more than one trip, won't it?"

"Could be. However, the elephants can help you move upriver faster, and float back down even quicker. That way, everyone is busy at once. Don't disappear completely. Marken will need to be able to find you, so all of the villas can work together to protect everyone. We need your help. The Kees survivors may return and attack all the villas they can find."

The man turned to the people remaining from Kees.

Many nodded.

"A new start would be perfect," one woman said. "I'm tired of traveling constantly at others demands."

The spokesman turned to Rusty. "We will try your plan. Will you give us our elephants back?"

Brix strode up beside her. "We will, with a simple, temporary exchange. Five of our villa members will remain here to help you move. In the meantime, one woman, and two almost adult males will come with us. Someone has to go to Tree Burb and inform them they are safe."

The man closed his eyes. "Take my sister's two sons."

Rusty stepped back. "They must go willingly. It'd be better to take two who are not siblings. Tree Burb may want to keep them to replace those who died."

It didn't take long to sort who would go, and who would stay.

As the two almost adults said goodbye to their mother, Rusty's heart ached. At least they had had a chance to grow up. Zande didn't. If Glenna ever came back to Shells, and things settled down they'd have to talk about the hurt deep inside them both. The child she wanted couldn't be a replacement for Zande. He, or she, would have to be wanted as much as the no longer living child had been.

Brix touched her shoulder, "Come on. It's a long walk back to Shims."

Rusty touched the roof of the glass lodge.

The people would harvest their food tonight, and then take them apart in the morning. The roof panels transport would be difficult, as they might shatter or crumble. The plants could be transplanted to the north, wherever they went.

Next spring, she would follow and learn the secret of the glass lodges. With Henry, if he survived.

If they were lucky, the rest of Kees inhabitants would never return, and never hurt another person.

If they did return, the Pit Miners would have three additional villas to join and protect the group, as well as the ancestral knowledge each had retained. Perhaps Marken's villa, and others he had briefly mentioned, along the river would join with them as well.

Rusty would do her best to use the ancestor's artifacts for good, and bring a new future to the much larger Pit Miners, who now needed another name. That would be Ambrena's skill to find at the Spring Trade.

For now, all she wanted was to return to Henry and Glenna, and build a new future using the skills she would learn from all the new villas and burbs.

## Chapter 46

Ambrena tried to back out of the Shells' treasury. No words of welcome. Silence greeted her.

Marken steadied her arm.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come back." Tears slid down her cheek.

Zella hobbled up to hug her. "Of course you had to return. Where else would you go? You surprise us with unknown visitors. And no sign of Rusty, or Corandra."

Falena tapped her shoulder.

Ambrena hugged Zella back, and stepped aside. "This is Falena."

Falena took Zella's hand and nodded. "My story will wait. I want to hear of you first. And Treny here has a story to tell."

Shara pulled away from her mother and grabbed Ambrena's hand. "You promised me! Where is she?"

Ambrena touched the young girl's lips with her finger. "We will find her."

She walked to Tanna.

Shara clung to her leg.

"How are you Tanna? Ola looks like she's doing well."

Tears trickled down Tanna's face. "She's not so well. I've been sick. Ola had the jerks. Babies with that, don't do well." The pain in her eyes reached out for help no one could offer.

"I'll help her," Shara said. "We had a boy who couldn't walk live in Leana for a while. His friends used to put him on a log, and drag him anywhere he wanted to go."

"I didn't see him," Ambrena said.

Shara shook her head and patted Ola's cheek. "He went to Mills to learn to carve wood."

"Even a skill was found for him. That's wonderful. You'd help Ola?" Ambrena watched the child's eyes carefully. It was sadly unlikely her mother would care. A reason to stay with Shells, would give her a lodge, even if Ola needed help every day of her life. Ola was too young to guess what future she might have lost.

Shara rubbed Ola's arms and legs. "She needs someone like me, I think."

Tanna laughed. Not like her carefree laugh, from not so long ago. "She has a sister your age, and a brother too. As well as Ambrena, Corandra, Rusty, and Henry to look out for her."



Tears glistened in Shara's eyes. She looked up into Tanna's eyes. "If they are ever too busy, remember me."

Ambrena wanted to hug Shara. Her eyes showed the same ache for belonging and feeling secure in her place that Ambrena had felt for as long as she could remember. She reached out and touched the younger girl's arm. "Shara, you will always be welcome to find me."

Shara pulled away from Ambrena and pointed to Ola. "You don't need me. She does."

Ola cried out and reached her fist into the air.

Tanna pulled her closer. "She hasn't cried much. Come here, Shara."

Shara crawled over and touched Ola's leg. "Hush little one. Someday, we'll find our way."

Tanna placed the infant beside Shara and stood up. "Come in, and tell us your tales."

Could this young girl, calming an infant really be the wild, flighty thing she followed down the trail? Ambrena sat near them, and waited, forgetting to introduce the new comers.

Marken sat behind her, and nudged her shoulder.

His touch woke flighty feelings deep inside she had forgotten. Blushing, she turned to Zella. "Marken was with the two bad men of Kees. He came with me, because he has no other place to go now. When Yall died, he helped Brix protect Jasey, Rusty, and me."

Tanna handed a teacup to Falena. "Tell us your story."

Falena took the cup and glanced from Tanna to Zella. "From what Ambrena, Rusty, and even Treny have told me, I am what you would call a rattler child. I, like Shara, have come in search of the much older sister I never knew."

Ambrena waited. She didn't want to break the silence. Zella's reaction would mean so much to all of the travelers.

Ola gurgled.

Falena reached her hands out to Zella. "I am so glad to have found you. Even though our mother never wanted to leave you behind, she died thinking you were safe. When Jorn came to us, she had already been dead many seasons. Perhaps, if she had still been alive, she might have made the trip back here."

Zella's arm quivered.

"I hope I did the right thing bringing her here," Ambrena said. "It was the one way I knew to convince the villa of Leana to help us. Rusty found something. Gerry from Mills, knows how to make it talk,

so we can learn more medical lore that has been lost. Won't you and Dover go and hear it?"

"Perhaps Brael from Shims can go with you and Gerry before Spring Trade," Dover said.

Zella nodded. Tears sparkled in her eyes. "I always wondered why she left. Did you leave Jorn behind?"

Falena nodded. "He insisted on staying with the boats, as if they couldn't take care of themselves. Then, he followed us to Shims, and is with Quan." She laughed. "I think he was afraid you didn't want to see him."

Zella snorted. "Of course I do. I always thought he was my brother, until Tanna found out otherwise."

Tanna gasped.

"Yes daughter, he told me before he left that you knew, what he had suspected." Zella turned to Tanna. "I figured he'd come back, someday."

"Is waiting on him why Tanna and Robin never started searching for other villas to trade with?" Ambrena asked.

Tanna nodded. "That, and there was community rebuilding, and so many orphans to raise, there was no chance to plan and prepare exploration trips. We had to wait until we had a herd of horses too. I had hoped one of your gen could pick up our dreams, now that there are enough people and animals."

"Treny, did you want to come?" Robin asked.

She shook her head, and leaned over her infant son.

"I wanted to come to meet my sister. She said I could," Shara said.

"So you came," Robin said. "Will you stay, and allow your mother to go back to Leana if she wants to?"

Shara glanced at all the faces. "Will she leave Wit here with me?"

Treny held the child close. "He is not ready to leave me."

Ola kicked Shara's arm.

Shara sighed and touched Ola's foot. "Then, I must stay and care for Ola. Wit can come next season if he wants."

Surely, Tanna and Zella wouldn't take another child due to Shara's desire to help an infant at this stage in their lives. Tanna would need every ounce of energy to take care of her two older children. They needed her most now. "Where are Pamma and Garn?"

"Myrya took them fishing. They're fine. Most of the children did

well after you left."

"Does that mean," Ambrena couldn't finish her sentence. Her own unknown history could be to blame. No one had known if her mother had chosen to have a child when she was born. After her mother's death in the fire Ambrena barely remembered, no one ever asked.

Zella reached for her hand. "Neither you, nor Rusty, nor even Corandra, are to blame. I had hoped your trip would help you see that."

Ambrena looked deep into her eyes. "You weren't sending me away?"

Zella closed her eyes and squeezed Ambrena's hand. "Of course not. Your own fear and pain was hurting you so much, it was hurting everyone around you. I hoped the trip would be good for you. I had no idea what would happen."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. Ambrena wiped them, struggling not to cry. "I wanted to find my place, and feel like I belonged."

Robin reached for her hands. "We need you here with us. Like we need Rusty and Corandra, wherever she is. Where is Rusty anyway?"

"Rusty went on with everyone else to Kees," Marken said. "We have to return to Shims in the morning. Henry is ill. Wenda is watching him. I hope he recovers soon, so we can hunt and travel together." His eyes teared, as Ambrena's did.

"I'll stay here," Falena said. "If my sister will have me."

"Of course," Zella said.

A tiny sand colored puppy peeked its head out from under a fur beside Ola. Shara squealed with delight and picked it up.

The entry cover flapped open. Corandra staggered in with a yellow box and dropped to her knees. Her gatherboard slid off her shoulder and thumped to the floor.

Zella gasped.

Robin glanced at Zella and hurried to Corandra. "What happened?"

"Water. Zella." She pointed to the box.

Tanna carried water to her.

Robin picked up the yellow box and handed it to Zella.

## Chapter 47

Corandra tossed and turned on the floor of the treasury. Knowing where she was; was one thing. Doing something about it; was another. "Zella. Ellie."

Voices hovered around her. Hands touched her. She felt, and heard, and it all passed into a dream. Someone lifted her, and poured warm soup into her mouth. Zella's favorite, nutria stew. Maybe she hadn't thrown her out into the cold as winter approached.

Her head stopped turning. She pulled herself up on her elbow. "Henry?"

Zella came to her. "Calm down now. You're exhausted."

"Where is Henry?" She pushed the cup away that Zella held for her.

"He will be here soon."

A small hand grabbed hers. "Drink tea. You need it, so I can hear your tales."

Corandra pulled back and stared at the small girl beside her. No one asked to hear her tales, other than Henry. "Who are you?"

The girl glanced at Zella. "I'll tell you later. Drink."

Corandra shook her head at the scene before her. So many people she had never seen before in the Shells' treasury. "Zella, what was it? What was in the box?"

Zella helped her sit up and handed her the cup. "Did you make the one drawing?"

Corandra nodded. Her head spun.

Zella smiled. "I wish I could have been there with you to see what led you to draw such a feature. Did it really look like that?"

"Rocks similar to those in the part of Shelpit I found the red box." Corandra sipped her tea.

"It's safe," Zella said. "Inside was a message from the ancestors. Thank you for bringing it to me."

"What does it mean?"

"We'll figure it out together, all of us, once Henry returns."

"I have to go," Corandra said.

"Not in the night," Zella said. "In the morning, you may go with Ambrena and Marken to meet Rusty and Henry. We must prevent any more battles."

Corandra finished her tea, and sat the gourd down. The blazing fire flickered on so many faces watching her. "Ellie?"

"Ellie is standing," Robin said. "She will need to rest a few days. Her lodge is the only place she'll be until she recovers."

Corandra slipped off to half sleep. Off course, she had ridden Ellie too hard. Ellie had stumbled outside Shells. Corandra had run ahead, planning to go back and care for her. If Ellie didn't survive, her hopes for the future were ruined.

A small hand clutched hers and squeezed.

Corandra opened her eyes.

"Hi. Feel better?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Shara. Everyone went to go do chores. Let's go see Ellie. I've never seen a camel before."

Corandra laughed. "Never?" She sat up and rubbed a bump on her elbow.

"Once, from a long distance with the hunters." Shara pulled her arm, "Let's go."

"Let me take my gatherboard."

"We'll be back. Leave it here."

Corandra led the chatty girl to the edge of the horse and camel lodge.

Ellie shuffled up and snuffled them both. Her eyes looked tired, and her legs didn't want to move at their normal pace. "Sorry Ellie. You can rest here. I'll be back for you soon."

Shara reached up and patted the camel's nose. "I'll feed you while sis is gone."

Corandra stared at her.

Shara closed her mouth, pouted, and then stared back. "They didn't want me to tell you. If I don't, you might not come back. Please come back. I've wanted to meet you ever since I've known about you."

Corandra took her hand and led her back through Shells. "Are you sure?"

Shara nodded.

"I'll be back." She stopped to catch her breath. She'd have to borrow a horse to go see Henry. "Where is Ambrena? Is she going?"

"Ambrena and Marken went to the lake to speak to the Goddess Kafa. Tell me about her." Shana took her hand and skipped along beside her.

This strange child, her sister, wasn't afraid of her like all the other Pit Miner children. Unlike others, she looked up at her, grinned, asked questions, and told her what she thought. No running and

hiding from her. If she really was her sister, she'd like to know her better. Someone who trusted her would mean so much.

At the treasury, they chatted more as they waited. Shara had so many questions. No personal questions, though they brimmed on the border of spilling out, as Shara fought to hold them in, and changed them to not seem intrusive. Even though she fought back the questions, Corandra knew they would come, unlike the local children, who feared her, and wouldn't dream of asking them. Shara waited, bouncing with anticipation trying to egg the answers she most wanted through a revolving, and hawk like, circling of thoughts.

Treny walked in and sat down with Wit. "How are you?"

The temperature in the treasury dropped, the wind howled through the entry and windsuns.

"Better. Will you come with us?"

Treny nodded. "The sooner to return to Leana. I brought Shara to you. I will send Wit next Spring Trade, if you want him."

Corandra's jaw dropped. "I want to know my mother, not have her abandon my siblings for me to raise. I am not an adult." Even if she had been given her adulthood necklace, it had to be a mistake. She wasn't ready.

"Shara said she wanted to live with you instead of me." Treny pushed the crawling baby toward them, and backed away.

Shara gasped. "No Mother, I want you to be with all of us."

Corandra took her hand. "Maybe I can come live with you, after I see Henry."

Treny shook her head. "The gen four grandmother, and Zella were right. Corandra, you resemble your sponsor, in many ways. I cannot watch you. Sadly, even Shara and Wit's faces remind me of you, which reminds me of him, and those evil days. I cannot do as Zella's mother did and move on. I will go back to Leana, and you will stay here, where you belong."

"I don't belong here!" Corandra shouted. "Don't abandon us." Tears welled in her eyes. She fought them back.

"I'm hardly abandoning you. You have Tanna, Robin, Zella, Dover, Henry, Rusty, and Ambrena. You aren't dumped on the plains for the lions." Treny fingered the blanket Wit had crawled out of.

Corandra felt rage beyond any she had ever known. For once, she would try to control it. Goddess Amber and Kafa had heard her request. She couldn't ruin it. "If you had left me for the lions when I was born, would you be able to raise Shara and Wit?"

Treny looked up into her eyes. "I don't know. I can't answer that now. If I had gone back and done that act, would I have grieved the loss of your life, and so never asked to have another child?"

Shara pulled Wit up against Corandra. "Momma don't leave us."

Treny stood up, and walked to the entry. "Someday, you'll understand." Without looking back, she walked out.

Corandra wanted to bury her head in her gatherboard and cry, like she had when everyone in the villa turned away from her. Shara and Wit wouldn't understand. She had to be strong for them.

Shara's tears brimmed over and raced down her cheeks as she rested her head on Corandra's knee.

Zella walked in the entry, closed her eyes and struggled to remain upright. She walked over and picked up Wit. "Corandra?"

Corandra gulped. If Treny left, another mother would have to be found for Wit, as Treny had mothered Henry. The next gen would be the same as this one. Again, it was her fault. The Goddess had given her one last chance to set everything right. "Yes?"

"You and Ambrena will leave soon. Don't try to change Treny's mind."

Corandra looked down at her gatherboard. "I'm sorry."

Zella sat in front of her. "Corandra, when will you understand? It isn't your fault. You helped, more than you will ever know. You will return soon, and I think you will bring Tanna and Robin's dream to life. I would rather have two wanted orphans now, than dozens later if Rusty and Ambrena had not found out about Tree Burb and Kees."

Wit struggled out of Zella's arms. "By the way, Ambrena found something at that place they had to dig."

"I know, I saw it to! I wanted to go back with her. Will you come? You'd know what it is."

Zella laughed. "An old woman like me travel? No. Take Falena. She knows as much as I do. I do not know if she will stay with us, or go back to Leana."

"I want to know Treny before she leaves."

"She will walk with you to Shims, and await the rest of Leana villa to return with them, I think. Use the day wisely. I think you will."

Ambrena entered the treasury. She touched Wit's head. Her gatherboard was so full; she couldn't stuff anything else in, or on it, and carry it. "Come on, let's go. Tanna will be here for Shara and Wit soon."

Shara picked up the sandy puppy as it waddled by. "Don't forget her!"

"She's not mine," Corandra said. "If you stay here, some day you will have a dog."

Ambrena laughed. "The sandy puppy slept in your arms all night. I think she chose you. Though, she has to stay with her mother for now. Kara made pretty babies, didn't she?"

Corandra nodded and pulled herself up. By going, at least she could talk to her mother. "Take good care of her, till I return." She patted the puppy.

Shara sat beside her. Tears rolled down her face.

"Or, should I stay?" Corandra asked.

Shara shook her head. "Go. I'll be waiting for your tales. Soon, I'll be big enough we can travel together. Who would take care of Ellie if I go?"

Corandra hugged her. "I'd almost forgot her! Finding a sister, brother, and mother will do that to you. I'll miss her."

Zella patted her shoulders, a mist in her own eyes. "You'll be back to Shells soon."

Ambrena and Marken waited with horses at the edge of the clearing. Ambrena and Rusty's futures looked bright to her as well. More opportunities here, and wherever their future trade travels would take them.

Corandra pulled her gatherboard on her back and walked down the path from the treasury. At Zella's lodge, she glanced back and waved to Shara, Zella, and Tanna. A puppy who needed a name wiggled at Shara's feet. She'd be back soon. Her sister needed her.

**###**

Thank you for reading Trails: Pit Miners - Mines. If you enjoyed it, please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite online retailer and share it on social media. Choose another fiction, or nonfiction, title to explore on your journey through the myths society has encouraged us to live by.

Thanks!

Gail Brown



## About the Author

Gail Brown began reading at far too young an age. Her preferred reading material was nonfiction, with biographies and science being at the forefront of her library excursions.

Her ability to memorize and use all the grammar rules in school years led to working in the school library while classmates caught up. All of those rules, and diagramming sentences was easy and relaxing. For many years. All forgotten now. Except the joyful memories of preparing the library for others to use.

Along the way, she found fiction and science fiction to help bring hope and light to a world of colorful dreams. A world where disability was accepted, people lived their lives without overwork and fear.

As an adult, gardening, and preparing the garden bounty, was her way to relax. To think. To make order out chaos.

# Other Books by Gail Brown

## Concurrent Earths

Concurrent Earths is collection containing 40 short stories of Earth, or almost Earth, that may, or may not, exist.

These stories reach to us across the stars. They share a thought, a dream, or a hope. Stories that touch the heart and soul.

Whether a single individual, a community, or a society, each story delves into specific situations, and how they might benefit society.

Or, how they might go wrong.

Very wrong.

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Memories of a war they have never seen cross the dimensional boundary to Kalara and Leonard.

At least, they think the dreams are nightmares of Galataria's past.

For Shalin and Jendal on Earth, the dreams are peaceful and serene. A beauty in life they have never seen.

Dreams bring a bit of both worlds across the unrecognized bridge into the other.

Galataria and Earth are threatened with ideas, and a life most don't recognize, and many fear.

# Trails Series

## **Trails: First Generation**

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Trails 1: Fault Lines

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Trails 2: Volcano

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